Rolling Stone
FEBRUARY 2022
ISSUE 1360

REGGAETON'S NEW REBEL

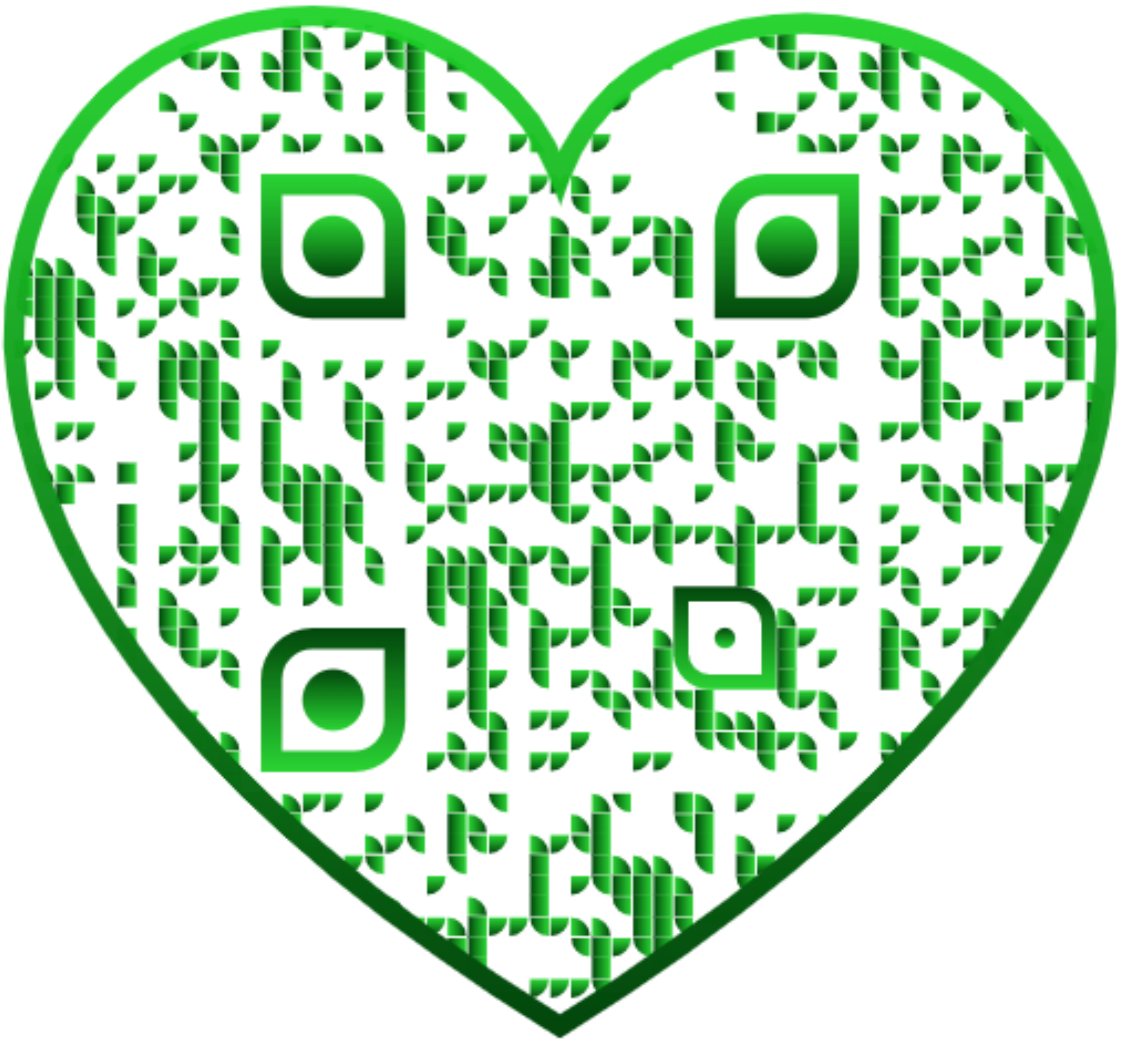
RAUW ALEJANDRO

PLUS

THE 25 MOST STYLISH MUSICIANS RIGHT NOW

UNDERCOVER NAZI

AN FBI INFILTRATOR TELLS ALL



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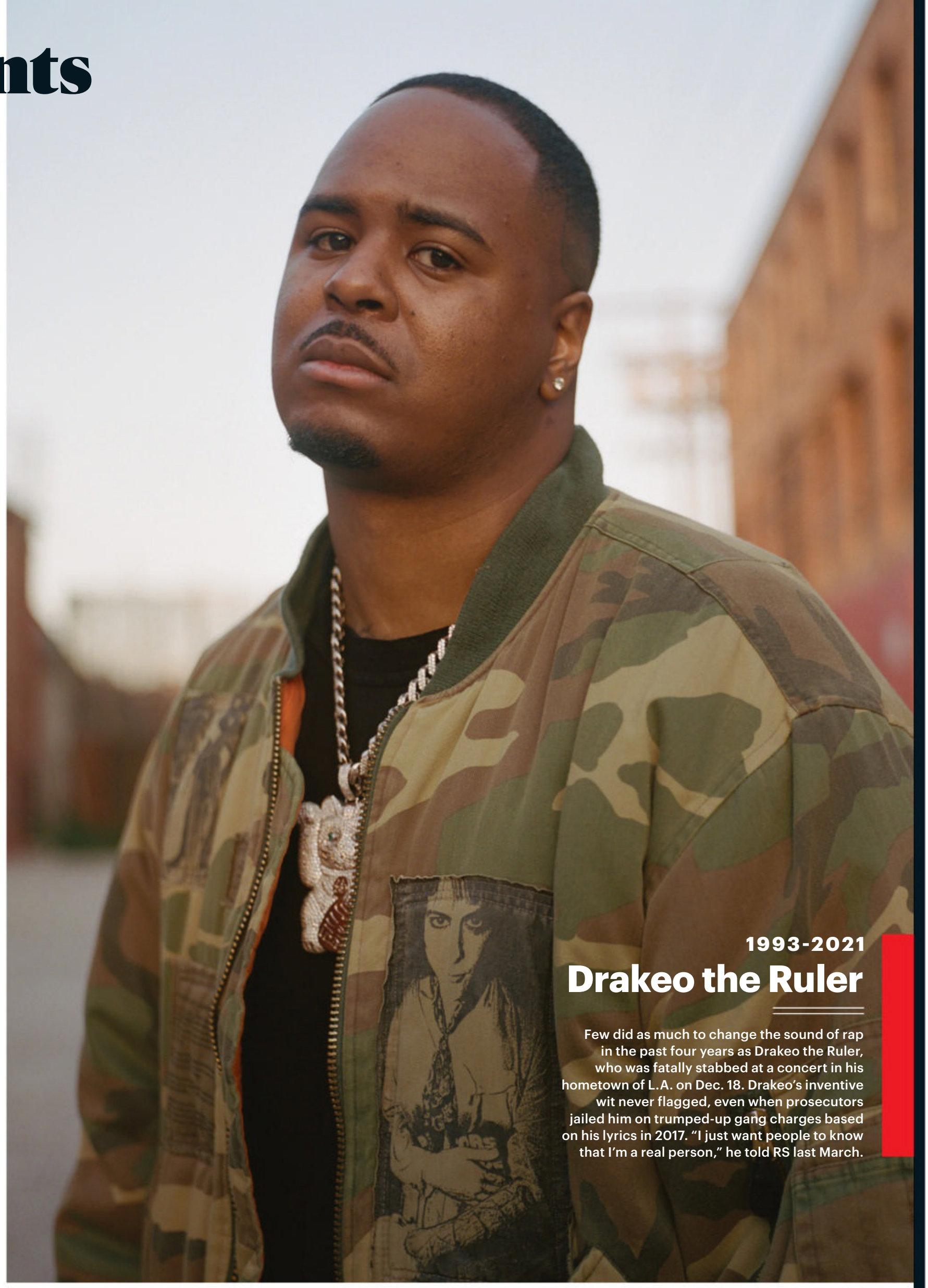

1993-2021

Drakeo the Ruler

Few did as much to change the sound of rap in the past four years as Drakeo the Ruler, who was fatally stabbed at a concert in his hometown of L.A. on Dec. 18. Drakeo's inventive wit never flagged, even when prosecutors jailed him on trumped-up gang charges based on his lyrics in 2017. "I just want people to know that I'm a real person," he told RS last March.

RAHIM FORTUNE

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Rauw Alejandro photographed in Miami on Nov. 30, 2021, by **Ruvén Afanador**.
Fashion direction by Alex Badia. Produced by HG Producers. Grooming by Millie Morales. Hair by Alexis Centeno. Tailoring by Nery Montoya. Styling by Darius Baptist. Jacket by Red September. Gold link necklace by Vitaly. Pearl necklace by Jewels by Dunn.

On the Back Cover

Cape by Saint Laurent. Pants by Roberto Cavalli. Boots by SWEAR.

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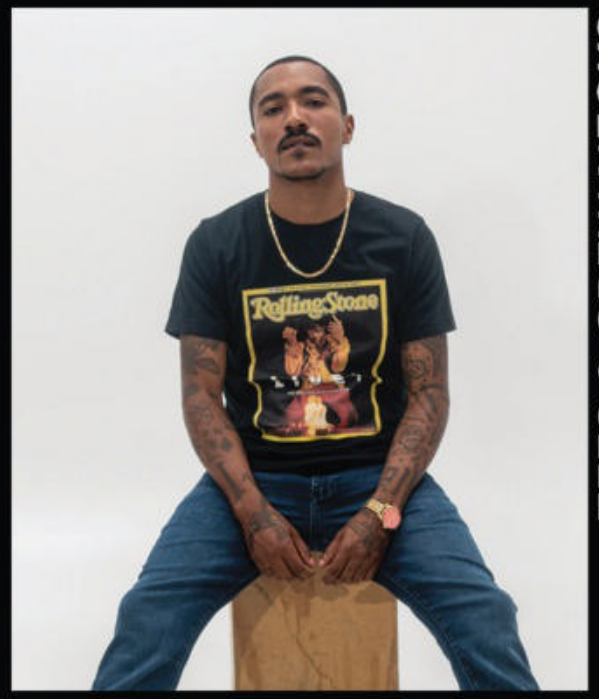

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Opening Act

Wizards of Hyperpop

IN 2019, Dylan Brady and Laura Les got on club stages with plastic trees and *Hobbit*-style wizard hats and sent kids wild with their gleefully chaotic, genre-exploding hyperpop anthems. Two years later, even with a whole damn pandemic in between, their band, 100 Gecs, have seen their legion of fans grow big enough that they sold out two nights at New York's Terminal 5. (They've seriously upped their wizard-robe game, too.)

100 Gecs are still putting the finishing touches on *10000 Gecs*, their second album, which emerged after a first attempt was scrapped. Brady admits it was occasionally hard to be creative during the pandemic, but the process brought clarity: "I learned how I want to continue living my life," he says. "Just trying to zoom out more."

At Terminal 5, even the unreleased *10000 Gecs* tracks started a frenzy, especially "Hollywood Baby." The guitars have a new hard-rock crunch, and Les, sans Auto-Tune, lets her vocals rattle ragged and wild. "We're in a different place," she says. "It would have been a mistake to do the same stuff." JON BLISTEIN

Brady (left) and Les backstage at NYC's Terminal 5 in December

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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT

A Fighter Chooses Radical Joy

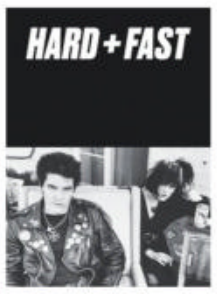
Hurray for the Riff Raff's Alynda Segarra is a powerful activist voice, but don't call them a savior

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Camille Lenain**

BOOK

L.A. Punk's Riotous Beginnings

IN JULY 1977, a new punk-rock fanzine called *Slash* appeared at newsstands around Los Angeles. "This publication was born out of curiosity and out of hope," read the lead editorial, which went on to attack disco, prog rock, and aging boomer bands, and vowed to "[send] the filthy rich old farts of rock 'n roll to retirement homes in Florida where they belong." The magazine gave bands like X, the Go-Go's, and the Germs some of their first press coverage. Capturing all of it was Melanie Nissen, a young photographer who was on the scene from the start, creating many of the most indelible images of the era. She lost much of her archive to floods over the decades, but the photographs that survived, many never before seen, are the heart of the new book *Hard + Fast*. "I never went anywhere without my camera back then," she says. "I can almost feel myself taking the photos when I look at them now." ANDY GREENE



Hard + Fast
Canongate, $50

▲ THEY GOT THE BEAT
Jane Wiedlin (left) and Belinda Carlisle not long after forming the Go-Go's. "Everyone was excited when they finally got together as a band," Nissen says.

◀ SHHH!
The Screamers were one of the first L.A. punk bands, but they released no music. "I thought it looked punk to have tape across their mouths," says Nissen.

▶ ASSEMBLE
Nissen shot the Avengers in their hometown, San Francisco. "That was outside their apartment," she says. "We decided to take a walk, for something different."

HURRAY FOR THE RIFF RAFF

ALYNDA SEGARRA HAD almost gotten through a full take of a new song called "Pointed at the Sun" when they began to cry. "And I crucify myself" went the outro refrain, Segarra's voice breaking.

By the time Segarra, who records as Hurray for the Riff Raff, entered the studio in the fall of 2020, they had become wary of self-martyrdom. Their previous album – 2017's *The Navigator,* which mixed Patti Smith-inflected punk with conga drumming and samples of Nuyorican poetry – launched them into a yearslong artist-activist crusade. They organized benefit shows for asylum seekers, wrote essays on abortion access, and started to get questions like "How do you have hope?" in interviews.

"I didn't feel big enough to do that anymore," says Segarra, 34. The hero complex that they'd come close to adopting was "coming from a place of feeling like who I am is not enough, that I've got to amp it up somehow," they add. "I don't want to get into that activist world that turns into savior shit. It was more like, 'I need to save *myself.*'"

If *The Navigator* was about Segarra reconnecting with their roots as a Puerto Rican raised in the Bronx, their latest LP, *Life on Earth,* finds Segarra simply luxuriating in their newfound artistic space. It's a record where New Age astrology pop and free-associative odes to flowers sit comfortably alongside hair-raising depictions of trauma. Segarra calls it "nature punk," referring to what they see as a growing musical movement in New Orleans.

Segarra was a teenager when their friends gave them the middle name Lee. "That was my traveling name when I was a train rider," Segarra says, referring to the period when, inspired by the romanticized tales of heroes like Woody Guthrie, they fled their New York home and traversed the country by rail. By the mid-2000s, Segarra had settled in New Or-

FAST FACTS

MOOD BOARD *Life* influences include Waxahatchee, Bad Bunny, and the Black feminist writings of Adrienne Maree Brown.

NATURE'S SONG "When you hear Alynda sing, you can hear the hills and valleys," says Roberto Carlos Lange, a.k.a. Helado Negro.

THIS SPREAD: © MELANIE NISSEN, 8

▲ THE DEAD BOYS

The leaders of the Cleveland punk scene, best remembered for their classic "Sonic Reducer," made a big impression in L.A. "I got knocked around at that show," says Nissen. "But this is one of my favorite live photos."

◀ HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU

The Weirdos were some of the flashiest dressers on the L.A. punk scene. This photo of singer John Denney appeared on the second cover of *Slash*. "He was making a face at me when I took that photo," Nissen says.

▲ Q: ARE WE NOT MEN?

Devo visited *Slash*'s offices on one of their first West Coast trips. "All of a sudden, they were in their underwear and these tight condom-like things," says Nissen. "None of this was planned."

▶ THE WORLD'S A MESS

John Doe (right) and Exene Cervenka at an early X concert. "In the beginning, they were just like everyone else out there," says Nissen. "Then they became the big L.A. band. They were so smart."

leans, and over the next decade, they became one of NOLA's foremost singer-songwriters.

In 2017, feeling it was time for a new middle name, Segarra chose Mariposa. At the time, they felt a strong need to reject Hurray for the Riff Raff's acoustic Americana associations. *The Navigator* showed that Segarra could be just as convincing a storyteller when playing electric guitar or singing to a New Wave beat as when picking a banjo.

When Segarra arrived at producer Brad Cook's studio in North Carolina to begin *Life on Earth,* that reckoning was still ongoing. "At the beginning there was a hard 'I don't want to use banjo or acoustic guitar if we can help it,' " says Cook, who describes the ensuing session (which ended up including plenty of acoustic guitar) as an exercise in "not let[ting] the world tell us what this instrument means."

"What I was taught is the honorable thing as a musician is to reflect the times, and these are the times," Segarra says.

On *Life on Earth,* for the first time in years, Segarra sings directly about personal relationships. "I have been like, 'Am I even a romantic?' " Segarra says. "I'm constantly singing about society." But writing songs about running into exes and what-could-have-been heartbreak felt necessary this time.

Segarra doesn't shy away entirely from the overtly political, either. The spoken-word, beat-driven "Precious Cargo" tells the story of a man who was detained in an ICE facility, whom Segarra met through their volunteer work with Freedom for Immigrants. But Segarra has little patience for anyone who expects them to deliver such a message via a three-chord folk song: "What I was taught is the honorable thing to do as a musician is to reflect the times, and these are the times."

Segarra began writing "Saga," a moving tale about trauma and abuse, during the 2018 Christine Blasey Ford hearings. "This should not be the defining moment of her life," Segarra remembers thinking. "Then it started to get more introspective. The true point of the song is to be like, 'My story is not over yet. I'm a fucking adventurer.' " JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

RS RECOMMENDS

OUR TOP POP-CULTURE PICKS OF THE MONTH

TOUR

1. Tyler, the Creator

Tyler's live charisma is second to none, making each show a frenetic visual feast. So the tour to support his excellent LP *Call Me If You Get Lost* will definitely be one of 2022's must-see events.

BOOK

2. 'Dilla Time'

Journalist Dan Charnas' definitive biography of the late hip-hop producer J Dilla isn't just an account of rap's craftiest beatmaker but the entire neo-soul scene he helped shape.

PODCAST

3. 'Wild Boys'

For the third season of Campside Media's *Chameleon,* comedian and journalist Sam Mullins unearths the story of the "Bush Boys," two raggedy young men who appeared in a small Canadian hamlet claiming they'd been raised in the woods and had never encountered society. It upended the town — but it was all a lie.

MOVIE

4. 'I Want You Back'

Amazon Studios' new Jenny Slate-Charlie Day rom-com, dropping for Valentine's Day, follows two fast friends who team up to win back their exes — offering a 110-minute romp as comforting as drugstore chocolates.

TV SERIES

5. 'The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel' Season Four

She flamed out as Shy Baldwin's opener last season, but our favorite fictional midcentury comedienne is back, this time trying to strike out on her own as a headliner, and maybe change show business in the process.

DOCUMENTARY

6. 'Poly Styrene: I Am a Cliché'

Celeste Bell, daughter of X-Ray Spex's Poly Styrene, became the keeper of her mother's legacy after Styrene's death in 2011. In this fascinating new doc, Bell delves into the good and the bad of it, from the racism Styrene encountered as a groundbreaking Anglo Somali punk singer to her struggles with mental health.

SONG

7. "Funny Girl," by Father John Misty

This new track has sardonic songwriter Josh Tillman quietly reintroducing himself, dazzling in Harry Nilsson melodies with a little help from an orchestral arrangement that echoes Old Hollywood. It has us psyched for his first album in four years, *Chloë and the Next 20th Century,* out in April.

For reviews, premieres, and more, go to RollingStone.com/music

BOOK

8. 'White Lies'

Meet the other Walter White. Author A.J. Baime recounts the incredible double life of this mixed-race journalist who lived the high life during the Harlem Renaissance while also going undercover as a white man in the Jim Crow South to investigate lynchings for the NAACP.

ALBUM

9. Erin Rae's 'Lighten Up'

One of Nashville's finest folkies hits her stride on this stunning (and uncharacteristically upbeat) collection of focused psych-folk and West Coast roots pop, from the swirling organ rave "True Love's Face" to the Topanga Canyon bliss of "Can't See Stars." It's her most adventurous LP to date.

EMPATH FIND A SURREAL NEW WORLD OF SOUND

EARLY IN 2020, Catherine Elicson had a realization: She didn't care about sounding cool. "I was like, 'I want to write songs that maybe aren't as punk,'" says Elicson, who sings and plays guitar in Philly's Empath. "I wanted to write the songs I wanted to write instead of trying to fit in." Most listeners first got to know Empath through the joyfully anarchic noise of 2018's *Liberating Guilt and Fear* cassette, which is still some of the most fun you can have with a tape deck and 16 free minutes. Onstage, the four-piece band — rounded out by drummer Garrett Koloski, synthesizer player Randall Coon, and keyboardist Jem Shanahan — established itself as a hyper-speed blur of sound. On *Visitor*, Empath's second LP, the melodies are brighter and the words are clearer, with a soft surrealism inspired by David Bowie's *Low*. It's their first project recorded with an outside producer, Unknown Mortal Orchestra's Jake Portrait: "He was like, 'This should be slower,'" Koloski recalls with mock horror. "And I was like, '*How?!*'" In fact, Empath were more than up to the challenge, and you can hear the months they spent diligently developing their sound during the pandemic. "Before, we were chaotic and noisy and catchy," Koloski adds. "Now it's chaotic and noisy and catchy — but it's also beautiful."

SIMON VOZICK-LEVINSON

Koloski, Shanahan, Coon, and Elicson (from left)

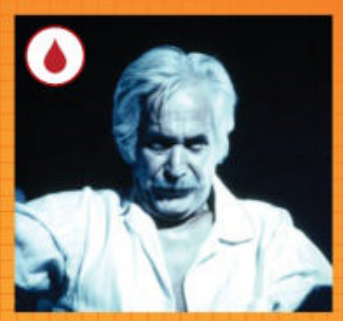
FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: GREGORY BOJORQUEZ/GETTY IMAGES; TAYLOR HILL/GETTY IMAGES; NICOLE RIVELLI/AMAZON STUDIOS; FALCON STUART; BRIDGETTE AIKENS; DANIEL TOPETE

The Moody-Vampire Matrix

As Marvel's 'Morbius' hits theaters – starring Jared Leto as the tortured scientist turned vamp – we take a look at some of Hollywood's most famously brooding bloodsuckers By ANDY GREENE

WEEPY

Edward Cullen, *Twilight* (2008)
A 100-year-old forever stuck in the body of a teenager, Edward (Robert Pattinson) is a "vegetarian" vamp who only eats animals and attends high school to creep on young girls.



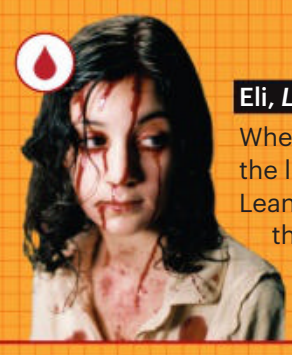
Jesús Gris, *Cronos* (1993)
When an old man (Federico Luppi) finds an ancient device in a statue, it pierces his skin and turns him into a vampire. But he'd rather lick blood off a bathroom floor than kill anyone.

Count Orlok, *Nosferatu* (1922)
This horror film was dismissed as an off-brand *Dracula,* but Max Schreck's Orlok has grown chilling with age, even if he gets so randy at the end that he allows the sun to enter his castle, which turns him to dust.

Angel, *Angel* (1999)
Buffy's boyfriend (David Boreanaz) is a kindhearted vampire who becomes a PI in this spinoff. Think Barney Miller with fangs and sex appeal.

Miriam and John Blaylock, *The Hunger* (1983)
Trapped in a loveless marriage to an ancient vampire (Catherine Deneuve), New York socialite vampire John Blaylock (David Bowie at the height of his MTV-era fame) wants nothing more than to finally die.

HORNY



Eli, *Let The Right One In* (2008)
When a bullied 12-year-old learns the little girl next door, Eli (Lina Leandersson), is responsible for the growing body count in their town, he enlists her against his tormentors.

BLOODTHIRSTY

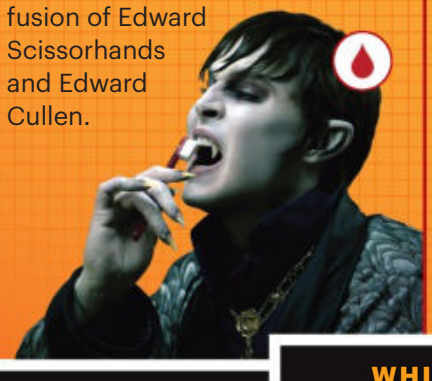
Michael Emerson, *The Lost Boys* (1987)
Don't you hate it when you move to a new town and the local teens trick you into drinking blood you think is wine, turning you into a vampire? If you're Jason Patric, you've gotta team up with the two Coreys to get out of this mess.

Count Chocula, cereal ads (1971-present)
Seems like a harmless marshmallow addict, but we have a feeling he's hiding some shit from his past. Whatever happened to his buddies Franken Berry and Boo Berry?

Count Dracula, *Dracula: Dead and Loving It* (1995)
In this Mel Brooks spoof, Dracula (Leslie Nielsen) wakes up every morning and proclaims, "It's good to be dead." The movie did kill Brooks' directing career.

Louis de Pointe du Lac, *Interview With the Vampire* (1994)
Brad Pitt's Louis has lived roughly 200 years when we meet him, and he's spent about 198 of them bitching and moaning about his fate to anyone who will listen.

Barnabas Collins, *Dark Shadows* (2012)
The world of 1972 is very confusing to this reawakened 18th-century vampire, played by Johnny Depp as a weird fusion of Edward Scissorhands and Edward Cullen.



Adam and Eve, *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013)
Tom Hiddleston and Tilda Swinton make eternal life look miz *and* hipster-ennui cool in this Jim Jarmusch film, as they hunt for O-negative blood and vintage instruments.

WHINY

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: SUMMIT ENTERTAINMENT; OCTOBER FILMS/EVERETT COLLECTION; 20TH CENTURY FOX/EVERETT COLLECTION; MAGNOLIA PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION; COLUMBIA PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION; WARNER BROS./EVERETT COLLECTION; CARLOS DELGADO/AP IMAGES; GORDON A. TIMPEN/SONY PICTURE CLASSICS

SPOTLIGHT

Myke Towers Makes the World Listen Up

After proving he can go pop, the Puerto Rican star recommits to his roots as an unstoppable lyrical MC

MYKE TOWERS RAPS with a natural ease – effortless, fluid, like he was born to do it. Except, when he was growing up in Puerto Rico, being a performer barely crossed his mind. "I swear to you, I never, ever, ever thought that I was going to be an artist," he says on a recent phone call from his home on the island. "I thought maybe I'd work in the music industry, but never as a singer or rapper."

He first began rapping as a hobby, inspired by his heroes Biggie Smalls, Jay-Z, and Tego Calderón; when he began uploading tracks to SoundCloud, his music broke out in Puerto Rico's underground. Now, Towers, 27 – whose real name is Michael Torres – has gone from being a reluctant MC to a respected rising star. After closing out 2021 with his first Grammy and Latin Grammy nominations, for his LP *Lyke Mike,* he's getting ready to release what he hopes will be another smash album in February.

Towers broke through with songs like 2014's hardscrabble empowerment anthem "Dia de Cobro," but he switched things up to embrace more commercial styles of pop and reggaeton on 2020's *Easy Money Baby*. That album opened him up for collaborations with ultra-poppy stars such as Luis Fonsi and Camila Cabello. With the brash bars and classic hip-hop sounds of *Lyke Mike,* Towers went full circle and showcased his skills as a lyricist. "When people listen to my music, they become aware of the hours dedicated to the writing," he says.

Towers says his next release, tentatively titled *Michael,* is "really personal....It shows everything I can do." It's also fueled by his son, who was just 20 days old when he was photographed with Towers for the cover of *Easy Money Baby.* "Everything I'm doing isn't even for me anymore," he adds. "It's all about him." JULYSSA LOPEZ

 | PHOTOGRAPH BY Erika P. Rodriguez

Towers in
Puerto Rico
last year

CKay, Fireboy DML, and Amaarae (from left)

RS REPORTS

Afrobeats Is Everywhere

For more than a decade, musicians and fans from Africa have been diligently constructing the sound of the future

By NELSON C.J. AND MANKAPRR CONTEH

IN 2006, a crew of young musicians from Nigeria set up the Hottest Coalition of Nigerian DJs. The group comprised artists living in the country as well as in the growing diaspora around the world. Their mission was to promote the kind of music that was popular in West Africa at the time, by acts like P-Square, 2Baba, and D'banj. These were tunes with elements of electronic and dance music set to African percussion, as well as including hints of highlife, dancehall, hip-hop, and R&B – origins traceable across the spectrum of Black expression. "It was obvious that [Africans living abroad] were craving their own [music], because that's one of the ways they could connect back home," says DJ Neptune, one of the earliest members of the coalition. "This was before we started having blogs coming into the game," he says.

Over the years, the kind of music they were promoting has become known as Afrobeats, a term that describes the most popular music coming out of West Africa. Coined in the aughts, Afrobeats (with an "S") is similar in name to the *Afrobeat* music popularized by Fela Kuti in the 1970s, but is distinct in its more modern origin and flavor. While Kuti's music was characteristically political and orchestral, Afrobeats is often jovial, digitally produced, and sung in English, West African, and pidgin languages.

Now, artists from Africa are rapidly reshaping the sound and texture of pop music – and Afrobeats just had its biggest year ever. Burna Boy and Wizkid, two of Nigeria's biggest stars, both took home Grammys in the past year, and American pop stars have eagerly tapped into the scene. After a dazzling appearance on Drake's *Certified Lover Boy,* fellow Nigerian Tems delivered one of the year's best records with her EP, *If Orange Was a Place*. There was also the viral rise of Ghanaian American Afro-fusionist Amaarae, whose Kali Uchis-assisted remix of her

IMAGES WITHIN ILLUSTRATION, FROM LEFT: ATLANTIC RECORDS; TOMM; SACHA LECCA

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **Sean McCabe**

2020 single "Sad Girlz Luv Money" became an anthem for independent women across the internet.

Last fall, Nigerian-born artist CKay's lovestruck single, "Love Nwantiti," became a Top 40 hit in the U.S., this after emerging as one of Shazam's most-searched songs (and dominating TikTok for months). "Afrobeats had its year of widest coverage from my perspective," CKay says. "The music reached places it has never reached."

Even with its recent Western crossover moment, Afrobeats can't be separated from African culture. It's in the percussion and deep bass of Burna Boy's "On the Low," a standout on his 2019 album, *African Giant*, and in the treatises on colonialism, economics, and politics throughout the record.

You can feel it in last summer's global smash "Essence," which earned the Lagos-born Wizkid his first entry on the *Billboard* Hot 100 as the lead performer (he nabbed his only Number One as a guest on Drake's Afro-Caribbean smash "One Dance"), reaching the Top 10. The song's chorus, "Only you fit hold my body," is a testament to the diligently rhythmic language of the diaspora; to a population's power to morph stilted tongues – injecting texture and vibrancy into the English language.

The same can be said for the original version of Nigerian singer Fireboy DML's "Peru," released last summer. It's like hearing all of Afrobeats' most compelling traits served up at once. Its intoxicating rhythm, courtesy of Nigerian producer Shizzi, unrolls over seductively polyrhythmic drums, while Fireboy's vocals gallop smoothly to the percussive beat. The Pidgin English dialects that are spoken throughout West Africa guide the song's inherent charm. Fireboy recently teamed up with Ed Sheeran for a remix of "Peru," and he's set to embark on his first U.S. tour in February. "In the next two to five years, Afrobeats is going to be the greatest, most recognized genre in the world," Fireboy says. "We are talking not just European tours, not just U.K. tours or whatnot, but world tours."

A Growing Listener Base

Nigeria is the bastion of Afrobeats, producing most of the stars who have penetrated the West in recent years. Industry insiders point to the country's population of more than 206 million, comparative wealth, and more-developed music-business ecosystem as contributing factors to its dominance. "They're all across the planet, as well," says Juls, a successful Ghanaian producer and DJ. "Everywhere you go, Nigerians are there, and Nigerians are very loud and proud about where they come from. They support their own."

"Afrobeats is going to be on par with hip-hop," says the Nigerian singer Fireboy DML, whose "Peru" was a standout in 2021. "What makes hip-hop great is it's recognized as a culture. Afrobeats is a culture too."

Back in the early 2000s, the Hottest Coalition found itself pushing for an audience many Western countries hadn't yet recognized as a significant demographic. "The narrative has started changing," says Neptune. "The acceptance we have now can't be compared with that time. I fly into America and land in Atlanta, and as I am heading home I am hearing a Davido song playing on V103, or I am walking to the mall and I'm hearing a Mr. Eazi record playing. It's almost impossible to say you don't know there's a genre called Afrobeats."

According to Pew Research, between 2000 and 2015, the African-immigrant population in just the United States more than doubled, exceeding 2 million. It was the fastest growth rate for any population during the time. Nigerians make up the largest share of that demographic with about 348,000 Nigerian immigrants living in the United States as of 2017.

By now, many of these people have children who grew up straddling two cultures, the kinds of listeners the Hottest Coalition hoped to reach back in 2006. Except now they make up a significantly more visible part of pop culture.

Large swaths of West African immigrants and their first-generation American offspring are concentrated in places like New York, the D.C. area, Houston, and Atlanta. In these places, it's not unusual to find Afrobeats powering gatherings of Africans and Caribbeans, whose culture and music share roots. "A lot of Africans in those cities have been religiously playing Afrobeats," Juls says. "It's just gotten around like, 'Wow, I went to this club, and this is what they were playing, and it was going off!' "

At the Atlanta stop of Wizkid's North American tour in October, an additional date had to be added to the 2,600-capacity venue to meet surging demand. One of the shows started with DJ Tunez, who serves as Wiz's in-house DJ, running through hits that spanned time and geography across the African diaspora. He played tracks by a new generation of artists and songs that the current generation of West African millennials learned from their parents – Magic System's "1er Gaou" and Awilo Longomba's "Karolina." "It's a beautiful time to be African," Tunez told the crowd.

Tunji Balogun was instrumental in signing Wizkid – as well as Davido and Tems – to Sony's RCA Records, where he was executive vice president of A&R. He now serves as chairman and CEO of Def Jam Recordings, but he was once a Nigerian American kid navigating double-consciousness. "Previously, I'd only hear African music in strictly African spaces when I was in America, like at a wedding or a birthday party. I would never hear it in a public space," he says.

Balogun is uniquely situated between African acts and an American industry that has doubted their necessity. "I'm one of the few executives that's a second-generation African in a position of power. I don't take that lightly. I want to be a bridge," he says. "Part of the reason I even wanted to take this job at Def Jam [is] because I feel like the label brand and what it represents aligns with my philosophy of [asking] 'Who's creating the future of these Black music experiences?' I definitely think that a lot of what's happening on the continent currently fits really well within that narrative."

In his new role, Balogun is hungrily approaching partnerships with African artists in Afrobeats and beyond, like the surging South African house music amapiano. "Number one, as a fan, I'm obsessed with the music," he says. "Number two, as an executive, I know that the audience is growing and that it can cross over to a wider array of fans and listeners."

A Global Sound

Now more than ever, Western audiences are accustomed to encountering African culture. South African Trevor Noah is one of America's most beloved comedians. Millennial Ghanaian American novelist Yaa Gyasi has won major awards for her two books on African and American life. Beyoncé sampled Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on a world-stopping track.

Yet, the strongest and most direct connection to the heartbeat of Africa seems to coalesce in the music from the continent, and in the music, composition is key. Just as Noah, Gyasi, and Adichie thread together global experiences, the most successful Afrobeats producers are the ones who can manage to fuse together all of the world's forms of musical expression and create something new.

Juls is a particularly talented alchemist of international music: Take "Wish You," a single from October's spectacular *Sounds of My World*. Featuring sweet singing from Nigerian DACA recipient Mannywellz and cool raps from Dreamville MC Bas (who is Sudanese American), "Wish You" starts with Brazilian baile funk beatboxing before introducing soft house pianos and African percussion. "I feel like all of those sounds are appealing to people of different cultures, different ethnicities, different backgrounds," Juls says.

"Essence" co-producer P2J says he and Wizkid align in taste and intention: working to widen the scope and audience of Afrobeats by merging African elements with styles like reggae and R&B. "I've always wanted to be one of the people to take Afrobeats music into popular music," he says. As one of Afrobeats' most prolific and versatile producers, the London-based Nigerian beatsmith has worked with everyone from Burna Boy, Tiwa Savage, and Wizkid to Aminé, Alicia Keys, and Beyoncé.

That Afrobeats is becoming such a force in the United States is no small feat. American audiences have a long history of being tepid in their embrace of global sounds. "To break records in the U.S. is a very different ballgame than the U.K.," says Nikita Chauhan, a BBC Radio 1Xtra alum who now manages Ghanaian producer GuiltyBeatz. "But once the record connects, there's no stopping it."

Take the indomitable rise of "Essence," first released in October 2020. For a subset of young, hip, mostly Black people, the song was an

immediate standout. "Essence" got an extra marketing push in April 2021 with a vibrant music video, and in July, after it soundtracked a summer of fleeting freedom for people across the globe, it started scaling the Hot 100. Sure, a Justin Bieber feature on the remix didn't hurt, but Wizkid mania had taken a firm hold of Afrobeats lovers stateside.

Last October, Burna Boy became the first African solo artist to headline the Hollywood Bowl; this year, he's slated to play Madison Square Garden, the first headlining performance for a Nigerian musician at the storied New York venue. Duke Concept, the production company behind the shows, was founded by Osita Ugeh in 2013, two years after he moved to the United States from Nigeria. The business initially had to be scrappy, producing concerts at small nightclubs and DIY warehouses – some of the only venues available to Afropop artists at the time.

Nowadays, things look much different. In 2018, Duke Concept secured a partnership with Live Nation, and last year spearheaded the U.S. tours of African acts such as Wizkid, Omah Lay, Olamide, Adekunle Gold, and Diamond Platnumz. "It's quite inspiring to see, because these are the dreams," Ugeh says.

Afrobeats is gradually becoming a mainstay on international radio, as well. As George Cook of Dallas radio station K104 explains: "Listeners who love Afrobeats are extremely passionate about the genre – and that passion has increased over time with the momentum of the music."

Cook admits that it took time to figure out how to make Afrobeats reach a broader audience. "The answer turned out to be just let it happen organically. The organic success of 'Essence' on radio demonstrates this. And now, I am hopeful for the bigger and broader success of other Afrobeats songs, like CKay's 'Love Nwantiti.' "

The Future Is in Africa

"It's pretty clear [Africa] is the next frontier," singer Amaarae says. "Audiomack has an office now in Nigeria. Spotify [made] moves towards Nigeria. Universal Music Group now has a [Nigerian] branch." She also notes that Apple Music's Africa Now and Africa Rising initiatives have amplified artists from countries that include South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria. Elsewhere in the streaming space, by late 2019, all three major labels had struck licensing deals with streaming service Boomplay Music – one of Africa's most successful, boasting 60 million monthly users.

There are obvious and overtly capitalist reasons for the burgeoning interest in music from Africa, like Africa's young and booming populace. There's also the fact that immigrants from Africa are among the most upwardly mobile demographics in America – almost 60 percent of the Nigerians living in the U.S. have earned at least a bachelor's degree, nearly twice the rate of the overall population.

Even the term "Afrobeats" could be seen as more of a commercial than cultural development. As the writer Korede Akinsete points out in a recent OkayAfrica op-ed, the term originated in the U.K. club scene of the late 2000s – coined as a reference to the primarily Nigerian and Ghanaian music that first-gens were increasingly demanding to hear at parties. Afrobeats became a catchall as well as an easy sell; to Akinsete, it felt like the commodification of culture.

SOUND ANCESTORS Producer Juls, DJ Neptune, and P-Square (from left) are Afrobeats mavericks.

Like some other artists, Burna Boy questions – and has personally rejected – the Afrobeats moniker. "It's not fair to just join everybody. . . . It's almost like joining hip-hop, R&B, and dancehall into one thing and call it 'Ameribeats,' " Burna told New York hip-hop station Hot 97. "It doesn't do justice to what's really going on." Burna refers to his music as Afro-fusion, with a base of Fela Kuti's Afrobeat and layers of other diasporic sounds atop. Amaarae, while wary of genre conformity, has also called her music Afro-fusion.

For all of its capacity to smooth over cultural and creative nuances, plenty of insiders see Afrobeats as only the start of a more significant shift. "There are people that do R&B. There are people that do pop. There'll be a lot more narrowing down of the genres," predicts Ibukun Aibee Abidoye, an EVP at Chocolate City, a prominent Nigerian label with a recent partnership with Warner Music Group. "I think it's going to change from just being known as Afrobeats to people really understanding that there's different contexts to it."

"When I grew up in the Nineties, the African experience was very much an outsider experience," says Def Jam's Balogun. "The most people knew were either just ignorant tropes or, like, *Coming to America* . . . which is hilarious, but also full of ignorant tropes."

In 2017, Balogun helped curate *Black Panther: The Album,* produced by Kendrick Lamar and inspired by the Marvel film about a futuristic African nation. The album featured Black artists from across South Africa, like the rapper Yugen Blakrok and gqom artist Babes Wodumo, as well as stars like Lamar, Jorja Smith, and Khalid. "I saw Black Americans embrace and proclaim their connection to their African heritage," Balogun says.

The following year, Beyoncé spearheaded *The Gift,* an album accompanying the remake of *The Lion King.* Dubbed her "love letter to Africa," the project was doused with stars from Afrobeats and other African genres.

Afrobeats' rise is a testament to the strengthening ties between Africa and its diaspora. Technology has shrunk the world; even the two writers of this piece, one in Lagos and the other in Atlanta, were brought together through Twitter, connected by a love of their African identities, people, and music.

Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo recently launched the "Year of Return," a yearlong schedule of events specially intended for young members of the diaspora living all over the world to engage with their roots. The inaugural event, in 2019, marked the 400-year anniversary of the earliest record of enslaved Africans being forced upon the Virginia shore. Cardi B was among the celebrities in attendance.

Meanwhile, Statista projects that the Nigerian music industry is set to rake in about $44 million by 2023. It's a dynamic that has the potential to reshape countries in Africa, tipping the scales of power toward culture-savvy young people. The #EndSars movement, among the largest youth-driven protests in recent history, was bolstered internationally, as musicians from Nigeria offered support for protesters and their demands to the government. After the reported killing of demonstrators by police at Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos, Burna Boy commemorated victims with a song, the searing and urgent "20:10:20."

It brings to mind the explosion of hip-hop in the Eighties and Nineties – a movement that reconfigured the way people saw the world, the reverberations of which we can still see multiple generations later. "Afrobeats is going to be on par with hip-hop, because what makes hip-hop great is not that it is recognized as a genre, it is also recognized as a culture," Fireboy DML says. "Afrobeats is a culture too."

IMAGES WITHIN ILLUSTRATION, LEFT TO RIGHT: COURTESY OF JULS; GEOGRAPHY; DAN STEINBERG/AP IMAGES

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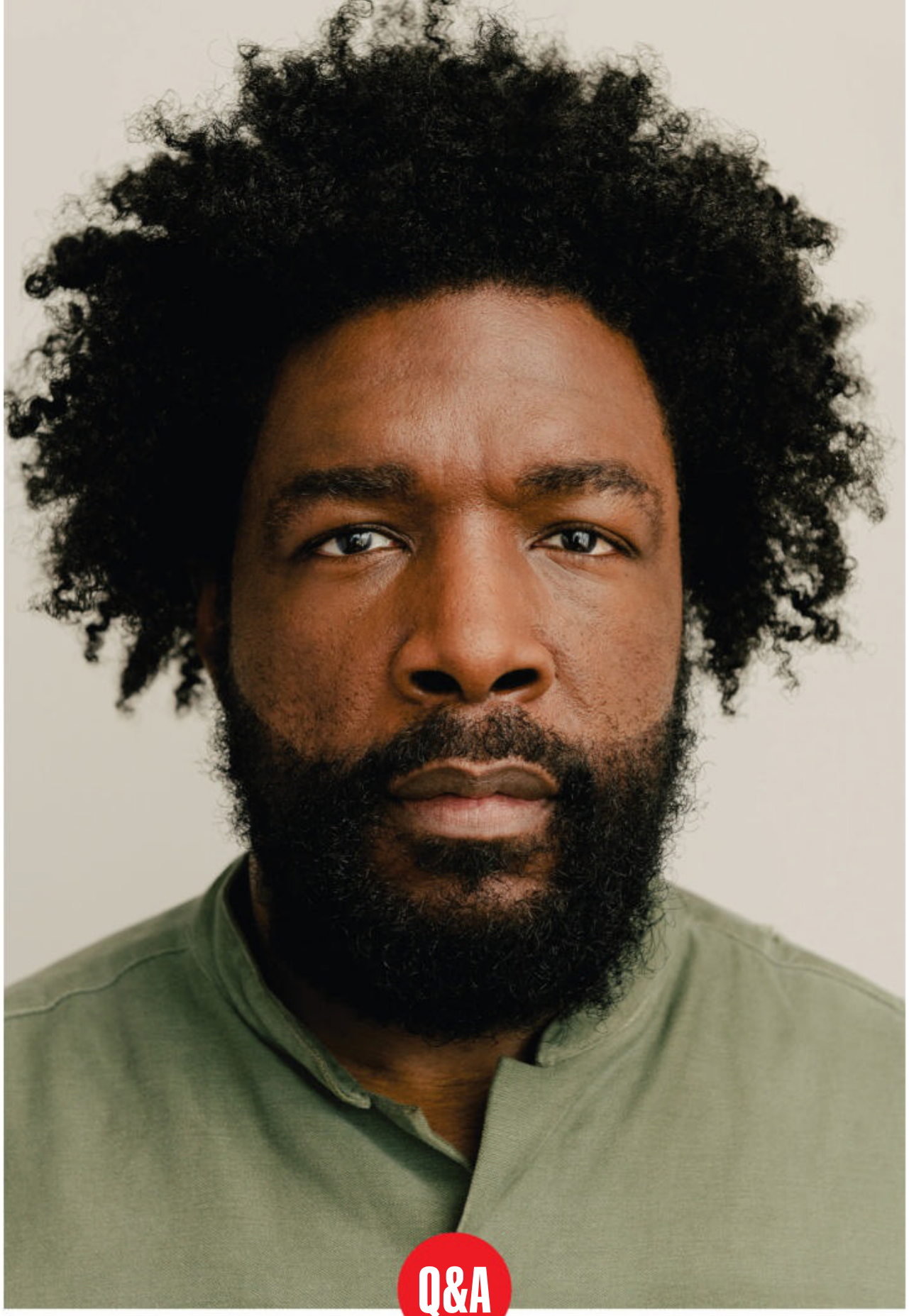


Q&A

Questlove

On 'Summer of Soul,' his upcoming Sly Stone doc, the future of the Roots, and devastating feedback from an ex-president

By BRIAN HIATT

"IT'S A NEW chapter in my life as a storyteller," says Questlove, fresh from reinventing the concert movie with *Summer of Soul*. His directorial debut, which embedded much-needed Black-history lessons inside jaw-dropping, long-buried performances from Stevie Wonder, Mahalia Jackson, Nina Simone, B.B. King, and many others, was one of 2021's most acclaimed movies, and an almost certain Oscar contender (it already made the best-doc shortlist). There's a soundtrack album out Jan. 28, and Questlove is already working on a follow-up film, focused on Sly and the Family Stone. But that's just the beginning of the new career he's embarking upon at age 51; there are numerous other Questlove productions on the way. "Right now, there are six projects down the line that will keep me busy, realistically, to probably 2032," he says. "You can only imagine how long the line is of people saying, 'Can you tell our story the same way you told this story?' "

How concerned were you about whether *Summer of Soul* would appeal to younger audiences?
With this movie, the very first question I asked – which I never asked for any album, any concert, anything I've ever done in my life – was, "Who is this movie for?" Baby boomers, I knew that was my sweet spot. And millennials are about to turn 40. So I was like, "OK, there's reach there." But when I got to Gen Z, I was grasping at straws. There was a moment where I just thought, "Drake is following me. So maybe I can DM him and get him to talk about his uncle playing bass with Sly Stone." Like, that'll be my one Hail Mary pass.

And then a weird thing happened, and that's called life after March 2020, where you couldn't tell the difference between what was happening in real time, in 2020, between George Floyd and our stock footage of 1969. And suddenly, it hit me. You don't have to pander to Gen Z, because they're living in these exact same conditions right now. And so this story basically just told itself. Timing was everything for this film. Everything.

Joshua Pearson, who edited the movie, said its rhythms were influenced by the Bomb Squad. Do you see it that way?
With every Roots album, I'm like, "OK, this is gonna be our Bomb Squad tribute record." And it doesn't wind up being that. But, I think, with this particular project, I was saying to myself, "OK, let me make this one normal. And then when I do the second one – when I do Sly and the Family Stone – that's going to be my *A Nation of Millions,* where I'm really going to push the pedal."

But once the film ended, [producer Joseph Patel] was like, "No, this is kind of radical, this might be *A Nation of Millions*." I just didn't realize that it was so radical, because people kept talking about the rapid-fire editing. It's just normalized to me, because I grew up with the Bomb Squad, I grew up where you had to cram 30 samples in one song.

You're someone who has literally blindfolded yourself to try to play drums more like Stevie Wonder, so to see a Stevie drum solo at the beginning of this movie felt very Questlove. Was that a deliberate sort of signature left on the film?
That's another result of timing. March 16, 2020, was really an important day on the calendar for this movie. Everything was on the table. So no more Harry Belafonte, no more Chambers Brothers, no more Mavis Staples, at that point. We had totally wiped off the table. And I was almost at the place where I was like, "No more movie. Maybe we'll wait for the 55th anniversary [of the Harlem Cultural Festival]." Like, "Do we just put this on ice until Armageddon is over?" And everyone's like, "No, we persist."

So now I'm on a farm with my girlfriend, who had befriended these people who have a nice spacious farm. And so I'm getting feedback from this family. And the patriarch of the family, David Zander, says, "Yo, where are you in this film? How do I know this is a Questlove joint and not just another Ken Burns production?" And I remembered what a moment it was to see that drum solo [in the raw footage]. And I was like, "OK, this is probably where I do the 'Show me this is your movie' moment." That was my presence in the film.

Right before the Harlem Cultural Festival, there was an Isley Brothers-led festival at Yankee Stadium, which was also filmed. Are you familiar with that one?
Even before this film, I'm the guy that was combing through YouTube to see any solo performance before 1979. And it's almost so scarce, but I was like, "There's got to be at least 100 concerts that have been properly documented." And, yes, that [Yankee Stadium] footage is out there. That project is being discussed. I've been approached!

Doc Severinsen was a successful musician, but he wasn't an award-winning documentarian. At what point does the Fallon gig [with the Roots on *The Tonight Show*] become incongruous with the rest of your life? Or do you just see it as fitting in forever?
I mean, nothing's forever. Currently, it's not in the way of my creativity. And I don't even see it as *Fallon,* more than I see it as I'm still a

DANIEL DORSA

student at 30 Rock University. And I don't waste a second when I go there. I'm always learning from our show; I'm constantly on the eighth floor at *SNL* when *SNL* is in season. I've bugged [producer] Steve Higgins a gazillion times: "Can I be an intern up here?" It's fascinating to watch that machinery work. I personally want to hang onto it until it is time to . . .

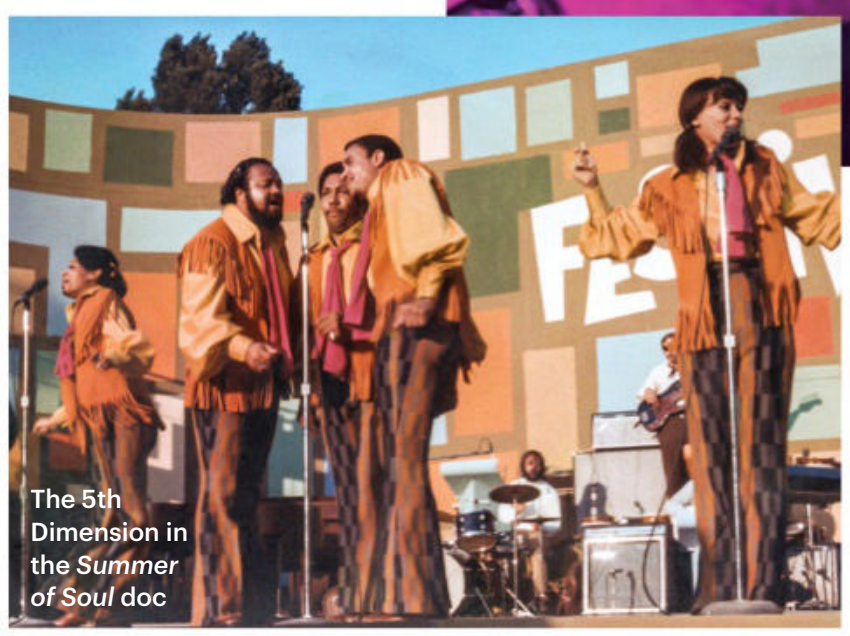
You know, everyone has that moment in life. The Roots were at that moment in 2008, where it's like, "Wait, you want to give this all up for something unknown?" If anything, I'm kind of a rolling stone. And my curiosity is my North Star. I'm a cat dad now. So I might want to be a veterinarian soon. I don't know!

You've written about DJ'ing at a post-presidency Obama party: You spent years putting together a playlist that told an elaborate historical story, and Obama himself told you to put on something the kids could dance to. How shattering was that for you?

"Play something from this century!" [*Laughs.*] One day, you get checked. And it's up to you whether or not you choose to listen and adjust. I had never done a project that I worked so hard on, that I thought was perfect, that just absolutely, utterly failed. I stopped DJ'ing for eight months. I was depressed. I could just stay stubborn and be like, "Yo, dude, I'm fucking Questlove. I know what I'm doing." Or I can listen. And I listened to my ledge talkers, who were like, "You're not going to throw your DJ career away just because you have one bad gig." Oftentimes, if we're meeting an audience that we don't understand, we tend to try to ignore them until we can't anymore. And I decided I might have a fear of kids. So I was like, "All right, I'm gonna face my fears and DJ for kids only." So then, after that, I started doing Saturday-afternoon DJ gigs for kids and their parents.

What's your vision for the Sly and the Family Stone documentary?

There's so many angles to go to. But for me, Sly is the origin of what we truly call the troubled artist. You know, what happens when you try to force a square peg into a circle? This project came to me in the weirdest way, because when we were editing and working on *Summer of Soul,* I know that in 10 days [after the 1969 performance captured in the film], Sly's life is going to change with Woodstock. You're going to be God, and this is going to be the most hellish two years of your life. We framed [Sly's 1971 album] *There's a Riot Goin' On* as a masterpiece. And, yes, it changed music. But I consider *There's a Riot Goin' On* the first reality show. This is you watching someone have a meltdown. Clearly something isn't right, and we're willfully ignoring it because the music sounds so good.



The 5th Dimension in the *Summer of Soul* doc

But masking our emotions in our art is nothing new for Black people. And so I feel like this movie is going to answer a lot of questions about artists that we have today. This is going to answer why blah-blah-blah gets arrested a lot; why they gave up early and you haven't heard from them; why they took seven, eight, 20 years to make a follow-up record; why their time management is always crazy; why they have a drug habit. That's what I truly want to uncover here. I want to humanize the story.

Have you started talking to Sly himself?

What really reeled me in was the fact that his interview was done before I came aboard.

"Masking our emotions in our art is nothing new for Black people. And so I feel like [the Sly Stone documentary] is going to answer a lot of questions about artists that we have. I want to humanize the story."

Questlove in New York last year

He did about seven hours of interviews. He's clear and concise, and he revealed a lot that I didn't know about. I didn't realize the influence he had as a DJ in the Bay Area.

It's been seven years since the last Roots album. What's the status there?

Richard Nichols, our manager and producer, was somewhere between George Martin, Brian Epstein, Peter Grant, Suge Knight, and Dr. Dre. Rich was everything. I didn't know how creative I felt after 2014, when he passed away. His last hurrah was [the previous] Roots record. At the time, I felt satisfied, like, "OK, well, we could stop at number 16 and just call it a day, and I'll do other things."

But the one thing Rich was a master of was telling us to stop and turn the damn record in already. Right now, there's easily 700 drafted ideas. Some songs completed. Some songs half-baked. But, I mean, what are the 14 songs [among] the 700 songs that we can't stop creating? So I promised my manager that I will not do any more new ideas after Dec. 31. So, come January, we're going to mix this baby, and it's going to be out in the first half of 2022.

I know you love Peter Jackson's Beatles documentary, *Get Back*. Is it hard not to think of all the other stories that need to be told as you watch it, though?

The most beautiful thing about the documentary is it shows the true way that creativity starts is you have to go through old ideas. When I did the *Voodoo* album with D'Angelo, the first thing we did was say, "What Prince album are we going to do right now?" We would just go through every Prince song, and then it's like, "Wait, repeat that part." And then you change the key, slow it down a little bit, and the next thing you know, a new song is born.

And you see Paul McCartney do that. He goes to old Beatles songs or old Tin Pan Alley. And John Lennon, he is either referencing Little Richard or Chuck Berry. The reason that's super important for the world to see is because I know the framing of hip-hop is as "that's not real music. They're just taking other music and claiming it as their own." So what we just watched [the Beatles do] for those nine hours, that's hip-hop. That's them using other songs to spark an idea for another song. So finally, you get absolute proof the world's most loved band did their version of what Pete Rock and DJ Premier and J Dilla always did, which is you take old records, and you try to make them into new records. And that, to me, is the important lesson in it all. ®

FROM TOP: THEO WARGO/GETTY IMAGES; SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

National Affairs

Joe Manchin and the Coal Cartel's Last Score

The senator from West Virginia is bought and paid for by Big Coal. With his help the dying industry is pulling one final heist – and the entire planet may pay the price

By JEFF GOODELL

ONE OF THE hardest things to grasp about the climate crisis is the connectedness of all things. One recent drizzly afternoon, I drove from Charleston, West Virginia, to the John Amos coal-fired power plant on the banks of the Kanawha River, near the town of Nitro. In the rain, the plant looked like one of the dark satanic mills that poet William Blake wrote about, with three enormous cooling towers that steamed like giant witches' cauldrons. Across the river from the plant, mobile homes cluttered the bank of the Kanawha, streaked black with pollution that rained down on them 24/7.

I had visited the plant 20 years ago, on my first reporting trip to West Virginia. Back then, the plant seemed like an indomitable monument to the power of Big Coal. The facility, owned by Ohio-based utility giant American Electric Power, is capable of generating 3,000 megawatts of electricity, enough to power 2 million homes. It is also one of the biggest carbon polluters on the planet, emitting 13 million tons of CO2 each year, which is equal to the annual emissions of about 3 million cars.

When I look at John Amos today, I see fire and rising seas, disease and hunger. I see a rusting industrial contraption that takes CO2 captured by trees 200 million years ago and rereleases it into the sky, bringing the heat of the past to our future. Coal plants are one of the primary reasons why shopping malls were burning in Colorado this winter and reservoirs in the West are dry. They are why Antarctica is cracking up, threatening the future of virtually every low-lying city in the world, from Boston to Bangkok. They are why infectious-disease patterns are changing in Nepal and crops are failing in Kenya and roads are washing out in Appalachia.

At this point in human evolution, burning coal for power is one of the stupidest things humans do. Coal plants are engines of destruction, not progress. Thanks to the rapid evolution of clean energy, there are many better, cheaper, cleaner ways to power our lives. The only reason anyone still burns coal today is because of the enormous political power and inertia that the industry has acquired since the 19th century. In America, that power and inertia is embodied in the cruel and cartoonish character of West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, who, paradoxically, may have more control over the trajectory of the climate crisis than any other person on the planet right now. Kidus Grima, a 26-year-old Sunrise Movement activist who helped organize protests against Manchin this past fall, calls him "the final villain."

Manchin's influence comes from the fact that in an evenly divided Senate, he is the swing vote that can make or break legislation. He presents himself as a pragmatic man from a hardscrabble state who is always trying to do the right thing. He values good manners and civility, and sometimes seems to be channeling the folksy charm of another famous West Virginian, test pilot Chuck Yeager, who was immortalized in *The Right Stuff*.

The truth is, Manchin is best understood as a grifter from the ancestral home of King Coal. He is a man with coal dust in his veins who has used his political skills to enrich himself, not the people of his state. He drives an Italian-made Maserati, lives on a houseboat on the Potomac River when he is in D.C., pals around with corporate CEOs, and has a net worth of as much as $12 million. More to the point, his wealth has been accumulated through controversial coal-related businesses in his home state, including using his political

ILLUSTRATION BY Victor Juhasz

muscle to keep open the dirtiest coal plant in West Virginia, which paid him nearly $5 million over the past decade in fees for coal handling, as well as costing West Virginia electricity consumers tens of millions of dollars in higher electricity rates (more about the details of this in a moment). Virginia Canter, who was ethics counsel to Presidents Obama and Clinton, unabashedly calls Manchin's business operations "a grift." To Canter, Manchin's corruption is even more offensive than Donald Trump's. "With Trump, the corruption was discretionary – you could choose to pay thousands of dollars to host an event at Mar-a-Lago or not," Canter tells me. In contrast, Manchin is effectively taking money right out of the pockets of West Virginians when they pay their electric bills. They have no say in it. "It's one of the most egregious conflicts of interest I've ever seen."

Manchin's grift is emblematic of generations of political leadership in West Virginia. I'm always struck by the difference between coal country and the rest of the state. Unmined places like New River Gorge (now a national park) hint at the spectacular beauty of West Virginia before the coal barons arrived; up in Morgantown, you see a thriving city that is not entirely built with money from mining and burning black rocks. But much of the state is a landscape of corporate exploitation, a place that has been pillaged by outsiders who have sucked out its gas and mined its coal and built mansions in Newport, Rhode Island, and the Hamptons, but left little behind beyond black lung and broken labor unions. The people I have met in coal country in my many visits over the years are tougher than the blade of a bulldozer, smart, self-reliant, deeply connected to the natural world. But the poverty and hardship is heartbreaking. If fossil fuels brought prosperity to a place, West Virginians would be dancing on gold-paved streets. Instead, West Virginia is the second-poorest state by median income, and near the bottom of virtually every social indicator of well-being, from obesity to opioid addiction to education. The few well-paying coal jobs that are left are disappearing fast. In 1950, there were 120,000 coal workers in the state; today there are only around 13,000 workers, less than two percent of the state's workforce.

Despite the relentless hardship, Manchin figured out a way to do pretty well for himself. "Joe Manchin will absolutely throw humanity under the coal train without blinking an eye," says Maria Gunnoe, director of the Mother Jones Community Foundation and a longtime West Virginia activist. "My friends and I have a joke about his kind: They'd mine their momma's grave for a buck."

So it was no surprise to Gunnoe that during an appearance on Fox News a week before Christmas, Manchin knifed President Biden's first-term agenda by announcing that he could not support the $1.7 trillion Build Back Better Act: "I have tried everything I know to do" to support this, he told Fox host Bret Baier. Never mind that the bill includes billions of dollars in programs that would help West Virginians struggling with poverty and hardship, or that without the tax breaks and other clean-energy measures in the bill, Biden's goal of cutting U.S. greenhouse-gas emissions in half from 2005 levels would be all but impossible to achieve. And without U.S. leadership on climate, the chances that the nations of the world will reduce emissions fast enough to hold warming at 1.5 C, which is the threshold for dangerous climate change, is virtually zero. "If Build Back Better goes down," says John Podesta, a Democratic powerbroker and former special adviser to President Obama who has been deeply involved in international climate negotiations, "then we are completely fucked."

All this could change overnight. "I think that the climate thing is one that we probably can come to agreement much easier than anything else," Manchin said a few weeks after his appearance on Fox. Perhaps Manchin's takedown of BBB was a negotiating ploy, and deals will be cut and a pared-down version of the bill will be passed. However it plays out, the idea that the fate of the Earth's climate has wound up in the hands of a Maserati-driving senator from coal country is a plot twist that belongs in a Hollywood disaster movie, not here in the real world where millions of people suffer as a consequence.

BLOCKING BIDEN'S AGENDA
Manchin, meeting with Biden's energy secretary, Jennifer Granholm, scuttled the Build Back Better bill in December, endangering the president's effort to combat the climate crisis. One activist calls him climate's "final villain."

"HUMANITY SHOULD HAVE phased out coal yesterday," climate scientist Peter Kalmus tells me. "Burning fossil fuels is what's driving the crazy heat waves, flooding, and ecosystem deaths we're now experiencing, and which are rapidly intensifying. And coal is the worst of the worst in terms of carbon-emissions intensity."

But coal was not phased out yesterday. Globally, 40 percent of electricity comes from burning coal, creating 30 percent of global carbon emissions. The biggest coal burner is China, which consumes more coal than the rest of the world combined. Here in the U.S., coal is gradually being displaced by cheap natural gas, wind, and solar. But there are still 179 active coal plants in the U.S., generating 20 percent of U.S. electricity. Virtually the entire states of West Virginia and Wyoming are powered by coal.

In the long run, coal is roadkill to technological progress. The problem is that it isn't dying fast enough. "No scenario for stabilizing warming below truly dangerous levels allows for substantial additional extraction and burning of coal," says Penn State climate scientist Michael Mann, author of *The New Climate War*. "Even the conservative International Energy Agency has said that there can be no new fossil-fuel infrastructure (especially coal) if we are to keep warming under 1.5 C/3 F, a level beyond which we commit to some of the worst impacts of climate change."

There are lots of reasons why coal has proved to be so hard to get rid of. Part of it has to do with the sheer scale of coal-industry infrastructure – the mines, the railroads, the power plants. Part of it has to do with the cultural idea that real men burn rocks for power. Part of it has to do with dark money and political influence. And part of it has to do with us, the energy consumers who don't know where our power comes from and don't really care.

But now the endgame of coal has begun in earnest. You could feel that at the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow last fall. "Sometimes, the coal industry isn't just the elephant in the room," commented Wolfgang Blau, co-founder of the Oxford Climate Journalism Network, "but the actual room itself." Overnight, 23 countries made commitments for the first time to phase out coal power. In addition, 25 countries and public-finance institutions pledged to end overseas public funding for fossil fuels by the end of 2022, and major international banks said they would stop financing new coal power by the end of 2021. Still, the agreement nearly fell apart in a last-minute dispute when a pledge to "phase out" coal was diluted to "phase down." More than 40 countries signed the pledge, but the U.S., perhaps fearful of offending Manchin, was not one of them.

Even with the endgame underway, the power of coal is reasserting itself in the U.S. Something like a fossil-fuel confederacy is taking shape, devoted to maintaining our addiction to fossil fuels. Politicians in West Virginia and Texas and Wyoming are aligning with lobbying groups like the Koch-backed American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) to keep coal alive, no matter the cost to their economy, their constituents, or the climate. Just as red-state politicians are trying to rig democracy by commandeering local election boards and oversight committees, coal boosters are taking over public-service committees that regulate utilities to help slow transition to clean energy. Republican state legislatures are cutting taxes on fossil-fuel extraction, stoking false fears about blackouts, and pushing studies that exaggerate the positive economic impact of fossil fuels. As climate journalist Brian Kahn tweeted, "Republican state legislatures are trying to create a world where it's illegal to do anything but say nice things about fossil fuels and give the industry all your money." In West Virginia, Attorney General Patrick Morrisey is leading a fight to the Supreme Court to undercut the EPA's authority to regulate carbon emissions. ALEC is pushing treasurers and state financiers in 15 states to fight back against "woke capitalism" – banks and financial institutions that focus on clean energy and refuse to do business with fossil-fuel companies.

TOM WILLIAMS/CQ ROLL CALL/AP IMAGES

There is no future for coal in America. It is a new Lost Cause. But that won't stop Manchin and the fossil-fuel confederacy from spreading the big lie that life as we know it today depends on burning black rocks for power.

MANCHIN GREW UP in Farmington, West Virginia, a small town about two and a half hours northeast of Charleston, West Virginia. Manchin's grandfather first worked in the mines, eventually owning a grocery store. His father expanded the business to a furniture store. The family was always deeply entwined in West Virginia politics: His father and his grandfather both served as Farmington's mayor. His uncle was a member of the West Virginia House of Delegates, serving stints as West Virginia's secretary of state and state treasurer in the years between. Like his uncle, Manchin worked his way up through state politics. In 2005, he was elected to a five-year term as governor, then won a special election for U.S. Senate in 2010, and was reelected in 2012 and 2018. Today, he effectively lords over the West Virginia Democratic Party like a mob boss, demanding fealty. "He controls everything," says Paula Jean Swearengin, a coal-country activist and daughter of a coal miner who ran against Manchin in the 2018 West Virginia Democratic primary.

How much of West Virginia's troubles is Manchin responsible for? "West Virginia has always been a classic natural-resources-dependent economy," says John Kilwein, chair of the political-science department at West Virginia University. "When coal was down, we were down. When coal was up, we were up. It was boom, bust, boom, bust. I don't know that you can lay that on Manchin's doorstep." But what you can lay on Manchin's doorstep, Kilwein says, is the failure to plan for a post-coal economy. Tragically, despair and addiction have often filled the gap: Over the past decade or so, West Virginia became the capital of the opioid crisis. To cite just one example: Between 2006 and 2014, 81 million opioid pills were shipped to pharmacies in one small West Virginia city. Between April 2020 and April 2021, overdose deaths in the U.S. topped 100,000 for the first time, with some of the largest increases in West Virginia, where more than 1,600 people died. "Joe Manchin is deeply responsible for this," says Swearengin. She points to Manchin's ties with the pharmaceutical industry, including the fact that Mylan Inc. – which manufactured opiates, as well as other drugs – where Manchin's daughter was CEO from 2012 to 2020, was one of the largest campaign contributors to Manchin, donating around $211,000 through PACs and employees since 2009. "Joe Manchin doesn't need to be in Congress," Swearengin says. "He needs to be in jail."

Manchin's personal wealth is directly linked to a small coal-fired power plant about 10 miles outside Farmington, in a place called Grant Town. The Grant Town Power Plant, which went online in 1993, sits in a holler littered with rusty double-wides and muddy ATVs. The plant itself doesn't look like much more than a flimsy steel warehouse with a smokestack. As far as power plants go, it's an old clunker in a world of Teslas. It generates 80 megawatts of electricity, about enough to power 40,000 homes. It's operated by a privately held company called American Bituminous Power Partners (AmBit), which sells the electricity under contract to Mon Power, a West Virginia utility that's a subsidiary of Ohio-based FirstEnergy, one of the largest electric companies in the United States.

Perversely, the Grant Town plant is a byproduct of clean-energy legislation. The Public Utilities Regulatory Policy Act (PURPA), passed in 1978 in response to the energy crisis of 1973, was meant to break the monopoly of utilities over electric-power generation and encourage independent power producers to build smaller, more innovative power plants fueled by hydroelectric power, solar, and natural gas. In 1992, PURPA was reformed to include waste coal – basically piles of dirt and coal waste excavated from nearby mines – as an "alternative" fuel. The Grant Town plant, which burns waste coal, or "gob" as it's called, took advantage of that rule change. Although burning gob can help clean up abandoned mine sites, it also transfers pollutants from the land into the air, which is why, on a pollutants-per-kilowatt-hours basis, Grant Town is the dirtiest coal plant in West Virginia.

Manchin doesn't own the power plant or the gob. Instead, his firm, Enersystems, simply brokers the transaction between the owners of the gob (usually abandoned mine sites) and AmBit.

Enersystems is a mysterious company. Manchin co-founded it in 1988, then put it into a so-called blind trust when he was elected governor. It is now operated by his son, Joe Manchin IV, and has virtually no online presence and is largely unknown outside a small circle of people in West Virginia. Its registered address is in the Manchin Professional Building plaza in Fairmont, where it is located two suites down from the Manchin Law Group, a firm founded by Joe's cousin Timothy Manchin. (Enersystems didn't respond to multiple requests for comment.)

REPUBLIC OF COAL
The aging John Amos coal plant in Nitro, West Virginia, can power 2 million homes, but is also one of the biggest carbon polluters on the planet, emitting 13 million tons of CO2 each year, equal to the annual emissions of about 3 million cars.

RICHARD JOPSON/CAMERA PRESS/REDUX

Manchin has a long history of using his political muscle to boost the company, and the coal industry in general. In 1994, he was state chair of ALEC and a national director of the Koch-backed pro-fossil-fuel group that has been one of the central forces spreading climate disinformation. As governor, Manchin recast the state's Department of Environmental Protection from enforcement toward what he called "compliance assistance," which accelerated the growth of mountaintop-removal mining and loosened safety regulations in underground mines. Just in case Manchin's pro-coal views weren't clear enough, during a 2010 Senate campaign ad, he literally aimed a rifle at President Obama's cap-and-trade legislation and shot a bullet through it.

As governor, Manchin had control over appointments to the all-powerful West Virginia Public Service Commission (PSC), which in turn gave him influence over the committee's decisions to set utility rates and approve contracts. According to reporting first published by The Intercept, in 2006, Manchin, according to an unnamed source, instructed his then-chief of staff, Larry Puccio, to meet with Mon Power lobbyists so that they would petition the PSC to increase the Grant Town plant's rate from $27.25 to $34.25 per megawatt hour, pocketing an additional $4.5 million per year from customers. Not surprisingly, the PSC agreed. It even agreed to extend the contract from 2028 until 2036. According to one study by a consumer-rights group, Mon Power customers have seen their rates increase by 30 percent since 2008.

That deal is still in effect today. Nevertheless, even after the rate hikes, PSC records show that the Grant Town plant has lost $117 million over the past five years. But somehow, Enersystems has figured out a way to suck cash out of the money loser. Since 2010, the fees from transactions on this one coal plant have earned Manchin $5 million, including nearly $500,000 in 2020 alone.

It's difficult to overstate how fucked up this is. If the PSC were working in the best interests of West Virginians, it would have demanded that the money-losing Grant Town plant be shut down years ago. Instead, West Virginians have been paying millions of dollars each year in higher electricity costs in order to keep running a dirty, inefficient power plant that is sickening and killing people with dirty air, but paying the Manchin family handsomely.

And who knows how deep this cesspool of corruption really goes. Exhibit A: FirstEnergy, the parent company of Mon Power, was recently enmeshed in an epic scandal in which it paid $60 million in bribes in a complex scheme to pass a state bailout of nuclear plants in Ohio. The criminal enterprise was led by then-Ohio House Speaker Larry Householder, who was removed from office last year and now faces federal racketeering charges. FirstEnergy agreed to pay $230 million to resolve charges against the company. U.S. Attorney David M. DeVillers described the operation as "likely the largest bribery, money-laundering scheme ever perpetrated against the people of the state of Ohio."

When Manchin is pressed about the fact that he makes a half-million dollars a year from a company that brokers waste coal, he lashes out. "I have been in a blind trust for 20 years. I have no idea what they're doing," he snapped at a reporter who grilled him about it last September. "You got a problem?" (Despite numerous emails and phone calls, Manchin's office refused to make the senator available and declined to comment for this story.)

In fact, Manchin's blind trust covers only a fraction of his earnings from Enersystems. "He must take us for idiots," says Canter. According to Canter, Manchin's business dealing may not break the letter of the law, but it is still highly unethical. The fact that most of his profits from Enersystems is reportable income, disclosed on his financial statement, means "there is nothing blind about this," Canter says. Manchin has even signed a sworn statement saying he is aware of his Enersystems earnings, which is pretty strong evidence that he is not blind to them. Canter calls Manchin's whole scheme "the definition of a conflict of interest."

ONCE YOU UNDERSTAND HOW the Manchin family business works, you understand why the senator drives a Maserati ("Hollywood could not cast a better vehicle for this guy to be driving," says activist Girma). And you can also understand why he knifed the Build Back Better bill, which has a variety of provisions that would accelerate the demise of coal. Central among them was the Clean Electricity Performance Program, which was basically the most important piece of climate legislation to come before Congress in more than a decade. The provision offered a carrot-and-stick approach to cutting carbon pollution, providing federal payments to utilities that increase their share of clean energy by four percent each year, while imposing federal fees on those that do not.

For Manchin, the entire Build Back Better debate has been a moment of extraordinary political leverage. "Manchin could say, 'Give me roads, bridges, broadband, and I will give you my vote.' And Biden would do it!" Faiz Shakir, a political adviser to Sen. Bernie Sanders, told me. "Manchin could lower prescription-drug costs for West Virginians. He could expand health and dental insurance." Kilwein contrasts Manchin with legendary West Virginia senator Robert Byrd, who was famous for bringing home the pork. "If Byrd were in this catbird seat," says Kilwein, "he'd be bringing a lot back to the state, a lot more than Manchin's going to bring. West Virginia would be paved in gold to get Build Back Better through."

With the clean-electricity standard, Manchin kept everyone on edge until a few weeks before the Glasgow climate summit, in which Biden and his team hoped to prove to the world that the U.S. was serious about climate action. If Manchin had signaled support for the clean-electricity standard, it would have given the U.S. tremendous momentum. Instead, Manchin announced in a closed-door meeting with Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm and White House aides just two weeks before the conference began that he couldn't support the clean-electricity standard. His explanation: Why should the government pay utilities to do what they are doing anyway?

And with that, any meaningful chance for the U.S. to assert itself in climate negotiations in Glasgow died. Many staffers and climate hawks who had been working on the bill felt betrayed by Manchin's negotiating tactics. "It was a sad moment," says Leah Stokes, an expert on energy policy who advised Senate Democrats. "We had all worked extremely hard on this. It would not have gone as far as it had with the White House and the Senate leadership if Manchin had not indicated he was open to it. It was not just a bunch of hippies out on a ledge smoking too much. A lot of the utilities were behind the bill, and Manchin had been engaged in good-faith negotiations with us for months. Or at least we thought they were good-faith negotiations. But in the end, he was not as interested in listening to the utilities as he was in listening to the fossil-fuel industry."

TARGET OF ACTIVISTS
Since he blocked clean-energy standards in Glasgow, Manchin has faced protesters around the houseboat he lives on while in D.C. "In the end, Manchin decided to listen to the fossil-fuel industry," says one veteran activist.

ALLISON BAILEY/NURPHOTO/AP IMAGES

Manchin's public rationale that power companies are already transitioning away from fossil fuels as rapidly as possible is blatantly false: Ninety percent of the electricity generated in West Virginia still comes from coal. Perhaps his decision was shaped by the good ol' boys he hangs out with. He's had a long romance with climate-denying coal barons and the CEOs of companies like American Electric Power and ExxonMobil (in a much-publicized Zoom meeting secretly recorded by climate activists posing as recruiters looking to hire lobbyists, a senior ExxonMobil lobbyist claimed that he talked to Manchin's office every week, calling the senator "a kingmaker"), all of whom have billions of dollars invested in fossil-fuel infrastructure that is rapidly losing value. Manchin is currently by far the biggest recipient in Congress of cash from the oil-and-gas industry, pulling in more than $570,000 this year, nearly four times as much as the next highest senator. Manchin, who is up for reelection in 2024, also profited from right-wing donors who appreciated him mucking up Biden's agenda. During the first nine months of 2021, he raked in $3.3 million in campaign donations – 14 times more than his haul through the same period the previous year. Not surprisingly, being the roadblock to climate action is a lucrative position.

Forget clean-energy jobs, or the devastation West Virginians will suffer from floods due to increasingly intense storms. One recent study found that more than half the state's critical infrastructure – including fire, police, and power stations – is at risk. In McDowell County, in the heart of West Virginia's southern coal fields, 60 percent of homes are vulnerable to structural damage from flooding. Who cares? For Manchin, the decision to oppose the clean-electricity standard probably wasn't a tough decision at all. After all, coal made Joe Manchin. Why would he want to kill it?

BIG COAL PLANTS like John Amos in West Virginia are dinosaurs from another age. The good news is, there will never be another conventional coal plant like it built in America again. Forget the climate: In sheer economic terms, the price of renewables is far cheaper than coal, even in places like West Virginia. The bad news: Big old coal plants are surrounded by a phalanx of politicians, regulators, and engineers who believe civilized life depends on keeping these old coal burners running.

Now, due to ever-escalating maintenance and capital costs, they are bankrupting West Virginians. One fall day last year, I talked with Sandra Blankenship, a former critical-care nurse who runs a bed-and-breakfast in McDowell County, the county with the highest poverty of West Virginia. "My electric bill from AEP is $1,000 this month," she told me. "It's going to put me out of business." Her 26-year-old daughter Kierstein Lester and her husband live a few miles away in a 1920s home with four young kids. They both work part time at an ATV shop, making $10 an hour. Their electric bill runs $500 a month. "Sometimes we pay more for electricity than food," Lester says. "Everybody does," adds Blankenship. The mother and daughter both supported Trump in 2016 and 2020. But now, due to skyrocketing electric bills, Blankenship says, "I'm gonna campaign as hard as I can to make sure Joe Manchin is not reelected."

Plants like John Amos are also ground zero for the climate crisis. In a world that took climate action seriously, they would be shut down tomorrow. If the U.S. has any hope of meeting Biden's goal of a zero-carbon grid by 2035, there are two basic options for how to deal with a big old coal burner like John Amos.

The first is to keep the plant running by adding on an expensive new device that captures the CO2 from the exhaust stack, compresses it, and buries it underground. Carbon capture and storage (CCS) is technically doable and is already used at about 20 different industrial facilities around the world, from steel making to natural-gas processing. Coal-country politicians love to tout the promise of CCS as a magical technology to keep coal alive. "Innovation, not elimination," Manchin often says.

But that's just a cute slogan. CCS for coal plants is wildly expensive – the technology to capture and bury the CO2 can cost almost as much as the plant itself. Despite the fact that the power industry has

been touting CCS for more than 20 years, there is precisely one coal-fired power plant in the world right now that actually captures and buries CO2. And it injects the compressed CO2 into old oil fields to push more oil out of the ground, making any climate benefit dubious. As Saul Griffith, an Australian American inventor and engineer, and MacArthur "genius" grant winner, recently put it: "Carbon capture and storage is a fraught fantasy of the fossil-fuel industry trying to extend the period of its relevance. We should be enormously skeptical, and as a populace demand far more transparency around any government plans to engage in such boondoggles."

In many ways, CCS is just another grift, a way for power companies to harvest billions of dollars in federal funding and perpetuate the big lie that coal has a future in a world that takes the climate crisis seriously. But indulging in this fantasy may be the cost of accelerating the transition to clean energy. In an effort to win Manchin's support, the Build Back Better bill includes a provision that would give utilities billions in dollars in tax breaks for each ton of carbon that is captured and stored. And the billions may not be entirely wasted. John Thompson, a CCS expert at the environmental organization Clean Air Task Force, makes the case that just because CCS is expensive, it doesn't mean it's not worth investing in. For one thing, it could reduce carbon pollution from recently built coal plants that are unlikely to be retired any time soon. "What are you going to do with all those coal plants in China?" asks Thompson. "If we can pioneer the technology here, the Chinese are very good at commercializing it."

The second option is to accelerate the retirement of big old coal plants like John Amos. "They are going to get shut down sooner or later," says Justin Guay, director for global climate strategy at the Sunrise Project. "We just need to figure out a way to grease the skids to make it happen faster." One recent study found that local wind and solar could replace 80 percent of the U.S. coal fleet, giving immediate savings to customers, as well as saving lives by cutting air pollution and saving the climate by dramatically reducing carbon pollution. In Guay's view, what we need is essentially a cash-for-clunkers program, where financial deals are structured to pay coal-plant owners to take their plants offline ASAP.

"For five percent of what we paid for Covid, we could have bought out every coal plant in the world," Guay argues. "Money is not the issue."

But coal plants do not just generate power. They also generate jobs and community purpose and identity. And that can't be replaced with a simple cash buyout, Guay says. "What would a just transition look like for West Virginia? How do you replace the good pay and union jobs that will be lost as we shut down the coal industry?" Guay argues that for all the talk about the Green New Deal, there has been no real thinking about how to actually manage the transition away from coal. Build Back Better targets $300 million to rebuild coal communities, but much more is needed.

"What's necessary now to bring about change in places like West Virginia is that we have that frank conversation about the endgame on a national level," says Guay. "We still have this abstract conversation about decarbonization and emissions, and it's explicitly, purposefully devoid of words like coal or oil or gas, because our national leaders want markets to do the dirty work, and they really don't want to get their hands dirty with some of the legacy politics in places like West Virginia. We need to start by saying that these coal plants have to come offline now. And once you start doing that, you can start talking about the hard stuff."

The other big hurdle to shutting down coal plants is the explicitly fossil-fuel-friendly character of regulators. In West Virginia, they don't even try to hide the pro-fossil-fuel bias: One of the three members of the Public Service Commission is Bill Raney, the former head of the West Virginia Coal Association, and well-known as one of the most powerful pro-coal lobbyists in the U.S. "The job of the PSC is to make sure that customers are getting the lowest power rates they can from electric-power utilities," says James Van Nostrand, director of the Center for Energy and Sustainable Development at the West Virginia University College of Law. "But in West Virginia, the PSC basically sees it as their job to protect the coal industry at any cost."

"Manchin is always talking about jobs, jobs, jobs," says one West Virginian who works in solar. "I've invited him here to see what we're doing. But he won't come. He's always hanging out with CEOs, but has no time for people like me."

One you-gotta-be-fucking-kidding-me example: In 2021, as the result of expert testimony from the Sierra Club, the West Virginia PSC considered whether the three big West Virginia coal plants, including John Amos, should be shut down as planned in 2028 or keep them running until 2040. The Sierra Club basically argued that it was long since time to shut down the plants – they are expensive, inefficient, and highly polluting. It was because of West Virginia's dependence on outdated coal plants that power prices in West Virginia had risen five times faster than the national average over the past decade, according to Van Nostrand. The Sierra Club cited economic models that projected that keeping the plants running could cost West Virginia rate payers as much as $1.8 billion in additional costs.

So what did the PSC do? They not only greenlighted $400 million in investments to keep the old coal plants running until 2040, but, according to Van Nostrand, they also basically directed them to spend whatever it takes to keep them running, even if clean energy is cheaper. "I've worked on utility regulation for over 40 years," says Van Nostrand. "West Virginia is the worst. They don't care about rate payers. They only care about keeping coal alive."

FEW PEOPLE UNDERSTAND the high cost of coal better than Keena Mullins. She is a 36-year-old solar entrepreneur with four kids, who works in an unadorned office about a few miles from the John Amos plant. She grew up in Dickenson County, Virginia, on the Kentucky state line. Her great-grandfather was killed in a coal-mining accident. Her grandfather, also a miner, died of black lung disease. Her father, who worked in coal mines when he was young, later became hooked on opiates, and was murdered during a dispute over a handful of Percocets when Mullins was just 24 years old. As a teen, she rode dirt bikes and ATVs in old strip mines. Coal was everywhere around her – and it still is. She breathes the pollution from the John Amos plant every time she steps outside her office.

For Mullins, growing up in coal country just made her tougher, smarter, and more determined to fight for a better life. After high school, she won a scholarship to Berea College in Kentucky. She was interested in biology and, specifically, in climate science. But she dropped out of Berea in her senior year after her brother was hospitalized while intervening in a domestic-violence incident. Mullins ended up back in Virginia, pregnant with her first child, and working as a waitress at Applebee's. Sometime circa 2015, she heard a report on NPR about the beginning of the solar industry in Appalachia. It seemed obvious to her that coal was going to die and solar was the future. She moved to West Virginia and worked for Solar Holler, a pioneering solar company, where she learned the basics of the business. In 2019, she co-founded her own solar company, Revolt Energy, betting her career that after decades of dominance by King Coal, the energy transition in West Virginia had begun. In 2020, Revolt, which focuses on residential, industrial, and commercial-scale solar, did $1.3 million worth of work. Mullins thought she had caught the wave.

But thanks largely to Manchin and his decision to gut the Build Back Better Act, she is now worried she will have to lay off employees. "I'm not even sure the company will survive," Mullins tells me, sitting in her spare office, with a few pictures of her kids.

Part of the trouble for solar in rough and mountainous West Virginia is the lack of flat land. But a larger part of the trouble is that the coal industry runs the state, and the fundamental belief of everyone in the coal business, according to Van Nostrand, "is that the power business in West Virginia is a zero-sum game. If you build renewable power, it takes away from coal. If you pass energy-efficiency rules, it takes away from coal. So we don't have any renewable power, and we don't have any energy-efficiency rules." West Virginia has the dubious distinction of being one of the first states to pass a renewable-energy standard – and then roll it back a few years later.

On the day we spoke, Mullins had just come back from a meeting in Kentucky to pitch Revolt Energy to a solar developer backed by global investors who is exploring investments in West Virginia. Mullins explains that she is worried that clean-energy development, when it inevitably comes to West Virginia, will be driven by outsiders rather than homegrown companies. Instead of training workers in West Virginia, these big solar developers often bring in contractors from out of state (or, sometimes, out of the country) to build their projects. "We've been working for so long to change the way Appalachia gets its power and to build solar for us, by us, right here [*Cont. on 80*]

REGGAETON'S GAME-CHANGING SUPERSTAR

Rauw Alejandro is the dancing, feuding, lingerie-dodging new face of the genre. But it took unshakable will — and some heartache — to get there

BY JULYSSA LOPEZ

It probably shouldn't have come as a surprise that the Puerto Rican star Rauw Alejandro, with his billions of streams and sold-out mega-shows, doesn't half-ass things. Even so, his commitment to victory is startling as he walks across a dystopian-looking paintball field near Miami one blazing-hot morning, carrying himself with the gravity of a highly decorated general. The 29-year-old artist, usually quick to flash an ice-white smile that twinkles with actual diamonds a dentist drilled into his teeth, is lethally serious as he eyes his teammates, who include me, assessing abilities and assigning duties.

Rauw had an opening in a grueling schedule that's loaded with back-to-back rehearsals, performances, and studio sessions, so he's organized a group of about 15 friends, among them Luis Jonuel Gonzalez Maldonado, or Mr. NaisGai, his frequent producer, and the reggaeton artist Lyanno, who's hanging by in an apocalyptic-looking helmet. Some of these people have been around since Rauw began uploading earnest songs to SoundCloud about eight years ago, and they're used to seeing him channel his extreme competitiveness into sports. I, however, hadn't imagined the outing being quite as serious, and when I tell him as much, his response is part youth coach, part fortune cookie: "You have to do things full-out."

Rauw is wearing a thick black hoodie under a T-shirt with the face of a lion stretched across it – he thought ahead and wore extra layers to avoid the sting of paintball shells. He puts me in charge of defense, but minutes into the game a shell explodes on my hand. I'm lamely nursing a bleeding finger when Rauw's choreographer from the opposing team, Felix "Fefe" Burgos, hurls his entire body toward the area I'm supposed to be protecting, a flying tangle of red hair and lanky limbs that wins the first round. It's a short-lived triumph; Rauw yanks down his helmet and darts across the field in double time the next two rounds, taking the game for his team like he planned all along.

Once the relentless pop of paintball guns has died down, Rauw is back to joking around with his friends, letting out a clipped chuckle that sounds like a vocal loop got caught in his throat. He describes himself as pretty "low-key," even though his sheer determination to shake things

Staff writer JULYSSA LOPEZ *wrote the Madonna-Maluma cover story in the November issue.*

FASHION DIRECTION BY ALEX BADIA. PRODUCED BY HG PRODUCERS. GROOMING BY MILLIE MORALES. HAIR BY ALEXIS CENTENO. TAILORING BY NERY MONTOYA. STYLING BY DARIUS BAPTIST. OPENING SPREAD: CRYSTAL-SPIKE CHOKER BY GASOLINE GLAMOUR. PREVIOUS SPREAD: CHAIN-MAIL HEADGEAR BY LAUREL DEWITT. SANDALS AND JEANS BY ROBERT CAVALLI. THIS SPREAD: CUSTOM GOGGLES BY GASOLINE GLAMOUR. PANTS BY BALMAIN. BOOTS BY RICK OWENS.

up in the Spanish-speaking industry is a big part of what's launched him into wild, sky-grazing stardom. In Latin music, which continues to outpace overall U.S. music revenues, Rauw has charted a rare path as a triple threat and a new kind of star: a charismatic, gyrating showman whose smooth singing, limber choreography, and mutinous ear for production mark something starkly different in reggaeton – if you can even classify his music as that. His sound, futuristic and heavily indebted to R&B, has sold out arenas across the world. Fans in places as far-flung as Zaragoza, Spain, and Milwaukee throw drawers' worth of lingerie at him while screaming to smashes like the six-times-platinum hit "Todo de Ti."

"He's just an exciting artist," says Tainy, the mega-producer who has shaped the sound of contemporary reggaeton. "To see what he's doing and what he's capable of, the melody and the tone of his voice, and combine that with his ideas – how he's thinking about what moves he's gonna do, what the crowd is going to do – it's something really special. His growth is insane."

Yet along with the glow of his rising fame and the lean, laid-back coolness of his presence, there's also an intense scrappiness in Rauw. "I see him as someone who wants to push," his close friend and collaborator, the rapper Álvaro Diaz, tells me. "Like, 'Oh, you're saying I can't dance?' OK. 'I'm not supposed to do this?' OK. 'This isn't going to work?' OK. It's like those things feed him to go harder."

The word Diaz uses to describe Rauw is "hungry." That hunger started building up during years spent broke and frustrated in Puerto Rico, hitting wall after wall professionally. He trained most of his life to become a soccer player, before a bid to go semi-pro in the U.S. ended in crushing failure and sent him back home, where he spent some time in retail purgatory, trying to figure out his next move. Once he'd landed on music, it was slow going: His early SoundCloud uploads lingered with a few meager plays, maybe 100 per song. "That's like your grandma listening to your songs," he says with a biting laugh. His unorthodox sound took a while to catch on, and no one understood the dancing at first. And then, just when he was starting to make local gains, Hurricane Maria ripped violently through the island in 2017, leaving destruction and devastation that people still haven't recovered from.

In Puerto Rico, economic hardships are inextricably tied to a brutal history of colonization and exploitation at the hands of the U.S. government. For a time, Rauw's career kept slamming into dead ends when all he wanted was to take care of his family: "I saw them suffering. You don't want to see them sad. You go, 'Why are you sad?' Then you learn it's because there's no money. *Las necesidades*. All that shit." He was trying to find an escape hatch, a way they wouldn't have to rely on anyone else. "That was the main reason I wanted to be successful in music, in life," he says. "I didn't want my family to have to depend on the government. Fuck the government. I was like, 'I'm gonna build my own system.' "

"I didn't want my family to depend on the government. Fuck the government. I was like, 'I'll build my own system.'"

That system has revealed itself over the past few years. He ended 2020 on a high, after releasing his debut album, *Afrodisíaco,* that November. It's full of Rauw's signature winding melodies, sprawled out over the thud of old-school reggaeton. He moved from there to a flood of collaborations in 2021, including the duet "Baila Conmigo" with Selena Gomez, which opened him up to more pop audiences. But what led to the seismic quake in his career was last June's *Vice Versa,* an experimental effort that flipped his sound swiftly and unexpectedly, like turning on a hidden light switch. The album is heavy on electronic sounds, including the thundering drum-and-bass breakbeats of "¿Cuándo Fue?" "Todo de Ti," an Eighties-inspired opener as shiny as a disco ball, reached Number Two on Spotify's Global 200 and secured 450 million views on YouTube, more than Olivia Rodrigo's "Drivers License" and Billie Eilish's "Happier Than Ever."

Rauw has been on the road since last July. Though his schedule is hectic, it's been packed with the kind of marquee-making career highlights that even established artists dream of: In October, he sold out four nights at the famed Coliseo de Puerto Rico José Miguel Agrelot, the 18,500-seat arena that's become a rite of passage for the biggest reggaeton stars. About a month later, he won his first Latin Grammy, for Best Urban Fusion/Performance, with his remix of the song "Tattoo" alongside the Colombian crooner Camilo. And a couple of days after that, he received a call from his management team letting him know that *Afrodisíaco* had been nominated for Best Música Urbana Album at the Anglo Grammys.

All the while, Rauw has been rehearsing nonstop. When we first meet at the end of November, he's days away from what he thinks will be his 63rd show of the year. He's shirtless in a makeup trailer, tattoos covering almost every surface of his chest. He's getting ready to go to the Louis Vuitton spring-summer 2022 men's spinoff show, which has turned into a memorial honoring Virgil Abloh. Rauw, who loves fashion and calls himself a massive fan of Abloh's, has exactly 20 minutes before a fleet of small, important boats filled with nearly every celebrity on the planet – Kanye West, Kim Kardashian, Pharrell Williams – begins making its way to the show at Miami Marine Stadium. A woman kneels in front of him with an LED nail lamp, giving him the world's fastest manicure and pedicure.

Rauw sits calmly, but he's in about three places at once: talking to me, chatting with his nearby personal assistant, turning his face upward so his groomer can make tiny, imperceptible adjustments to his eyebrows, all designed to maximize his prettiness. A snippet of "Todo de Ti" starts blasting from someone's phone; the song follows him around like a double-edged reminder of both his recent accomplishments and the chart-busting streaming behemoths people expect from him now. "Doing good music isn't easy in terms of, like, after hit after hit," Rauw says. "You feel like now you're pickier. It's like, 'Oh shit, I need to be more strict – with the sounds, the lyrics, the melodies, everything' . . . It gets stressful sometimes."

Rauw has a couple of shows left before the year closes out, then he's heading to the studio to put the finishing touches on *Trap Cake Vol. 2*, a project he says riffs on the trap and R&B roots longtime fans might remember from his underground days. (Rauw plans to have it out by the end of April.) Then he's starting the recording process for another album, expected out later in the year. In March, his tour ramps up again. The biggest challenge, Rauw says, is quality control. "You're doing the videos, you're doing shoots, you're doing production, you're doing shows. Something is gonna mess up. It's almost impossible. But it is what it is," he says, wearily. A couple

of people flit into the room with time checks, letting Rauw know the window to leave for the fashion show is shrinking with every second.

Rauw lists a couple of ways he decompresses. "I try to be with my girl," he says, referring to the Spanish singer Rosalía. "We fly a weekend off, if we can." The couple has been Instagram-official since September, after fans spent more than a year inspecting each and every one of their photos and frequent social media exchanges. There are also the elaborate activities, like paintball and riding motorbikes and Jet Skis with friends, when he can. But the truth is, the urge to keep going is hard-wired in him. "I try to have fun, but I'm a workaholic. After a few days of being off, I get this thing, like, 'What's going on?' " he says, looking around, pantomiming restlessness. "I need to work."

The room gets cleared out so Rauw can change, and he emerges in head-to-toe Louis Vuitton – one of the looks from the 2021 men's collection, composed of a brown turtleneck sweater dotted with tiny LV logos, flared brown pants, and what looks like a massive wrestling champion's belt tied around his waist. He ends up making it onto his boat, of course, and finds out that he's sailing over to the venue with Ricky Martin, whom he's never met in person.

The two of them chat about the event and take a video that Rauw quickly uploads to his Instagram stories. "Ricky, chilling," he narrates in Spanish. "Rauw in the back, getting some sun." Martin flashes a peace sign and jokes, "Having a bad time!" The boat speeds on, two generations of Latin pop bobbing tranquilly across foamy Miami waters.

A casual encounter

with a pop icon like Ricky Martin is something Rauw, born Raúl Alejandro Ocasio Ruiz, could only have dreamed of as a kid. He used to sing and dance in school talent shows when he was growing up, and while describing some of his performances to me, he breaks into bright, romantic songs that were popular on Spanish-language radio in the early 2000s. "I did the one by David Bisbal, the Spaniard – how did it go? 'Ave María, ¿cuándo serás mía?' And Luis Fonsi: 'No te cambio por ninguna,' " he trills, hitting each note. He made his big debut in the third grade, lip-syncing to traditional Puerto Rican boleros while wearing a tiny suit and holding a little guitar. But while he was drawn to music and performing, the plan was always to play soccer professionally.

PANTS BY ALEXANDER MCQUEEN. WATCH BY CARTIER. RINGS BY JEWELS BY DUNN.

When Rauw was about seven years old, he was kicking around a soccer ball outside of his school, waiting for his mom to pick him up. Once she arrived, a retired soccer player named Richie Romano approached them and suggested they stop by a small athletic store he owned. Right there, Rauw decided to join a kids' team Romano coached. They left, but not before Rauw's mom bought him his first pair of cleats. He slept in them that night. Soccer became his main thrill as a kid, and he took it more seriously as he got a little older. His hero was Cristiano Ronaldo. "I liked how people loved him. And I was like, 'I want to be him' – how he maintained his family," he remembers. "There used to be these videos on YouTube, with these episodes about him, and he had enough money to buy his mom a house, his family, everyone. I just wanted to be him."

Rauw's family lived in a small, two-bedroom house in Palma Sola, part of the northern region of Canóvanas in Puerto Rico. The area was in the countryside, mountainous, full of trees, with a creek nearby. The lights went out a lot and the water ran cold, but he's wistful about how quiet it was. Rauw remembers that his grandfather, Alejandro, would sit on the porch with a guitar, whistling and making up melodies. Rauw thinks those sounds stayed nestled somewhere deep in his subconscious. He shared a room with his older sister most of his life, until the family put up a brittle piece of drywall to divide the space. They'd wake at the crack of dawn to go to school in the nearby city of Carolina, east of San Juan (one of his classmates was the rapper Anuel AA). "I always had a little bit of city, but when I returned home, it was farms," Rauw says.

Then, when Rauw was about 12, his parents divorced. His mother moved him and his sister to Carolina permanently. She never remarried and rented a small apartment, working around the clock as a government administrator to keep it. That's when Rauw started to see soccer as a route to take care of her. He attended the University of Puerto Rico at Carolina, and in 2013, he began training in Florida in the hopes of getting drafted to the semi-professional Premier Development League (now USL League Two). His days were long and draining; he would practice for hours on top of working three jobs. Eventually, it became clear his dreams weren't panning out. Though he's talked in the past about how a few injuries set him back, he says now that the main issue that ended his soccer career was psychological – the exhaustion and disappointment of pouring everything into something that just wasn't going to happen.

"When you're trying so hard to do something and it's not working out, you get frustrated. Plus, I was having economic issues, personal problems with my family, a lot of stuff," he says. "My family didn't have money, and you get to the house, and everyone is fighting: 'There's no money, there's no money.' Soccer took so much time, and I wasn't seeing the light." A few scouts flew him to Europe for a match that didn't go well, further confirmation the sport wasn't for him. "It was like, 'Bro. I know you want to be a soccer player, but you're not going to be a soccer player.' "

Rauw returned to the island, dejected. He kept working in retail – he had jobs at Aldo and Guess and TJ Maxx that he juggled over the years – and worked as a server at weddings. In Florida, he had started to write music as a hobby and was surprised when a roommate encouraged him to put it out. He began spending time at home studios, improvising over gritty, homemade trap beats. Rauw was more of a singer than a rapper, though, and he brought a smoother delivery to the music.

Around that time, he made a Facebook page with some of the songs he'd been working on, and it caught the attention of his future collaborator Mr. NaisGai, who had gone to elementary school with him. "He had a different proposal," NaisGai says. "In Puerto Rico, what you heard most was reggaeton, and at that moment, Rauw was making R&B with an American flow."

Something was stirring in Puerto Rico's underground around the mid-2010s. Artists like Álvaro Diaz and Myke Towers had also found a niche making songs that were influenced by English-language hip-hop and internet culture, and they started releasing them on their own, without label support.

Rauw says their scene ran parallel with another one, made up of trap and reggaeton newcomers like Anuel AA, Bryant Myers, and Ozuna. "We were more like indie underground, more hipsters, more into fashion, Rick Owens," Rauw says. "The other guys were like reggaeton, cargoes, snapbacks." Eventually, the two groups merged and began getting love from Puerto Rican veterans, such as De La Ghetto, Arcángel, and Nicky Jam – a big-bang-style collision in Puerto Rican music that led to massive collaborations that reached millions of listeners.

Out of all the artists making noise on the island, it was a 25-year-old kid who used to bag groceries at a local Econo supermarket who crash-landed into the mainstream in the biggest way, becoming the mega-star Bad Bunny. Rauw and Bad Bunny actually met in a studio in Carolina during those early years and talked about collaborating one day. When Bad Bunny broke through, Rauw says, he saw the rise as a massive victory. "It didn't matter who was breaking through first – he creates a door, an open door, to a new movement," he says. "So if people are fucking with the music, there's a whole bunch of other artists that are doing the same thing, in their own way."

> **"There's pop star [couples] where it's like the whole telenovela. I really hate that shit. [Rosalía] and I are real stuff."**

Still, Rauw was hitting a wall again. It was 2016, and he was doing local shows. A neighbor gave him the phone number for a manager she knew named Eric Duars, who'd worked with big names in reggaeton, like Zion Y Lennox and De La Ghetto. Rauw reached out but never heard back. Their paths eventually crossed at a giant trap concert, where Rauw was performing with the rapper Rafa Pabón, who introduced them. "And then I waited about another three more months," Rauw remembers. The wait paid off by the next year: Duars signed him to his label, Duars Entertainment, in January 2017.

Rauw kept collaborating with his peers from the SoundCloud trenches, and for a minute, it seemed he was picking up steam. Then Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico, becoming one of the worst natural disasters in the history of the Caribbean. Approximately 3,000 people died, thousands of homes were destroyed, and others didn't have full power for nearly a year. Making music was out of the question. "If you're a local artist, when your city stops, you cannot do nothing. You don't move," Rauw says, pointing out that rising stars like Bad Bunny might have had more options to record internationally. "But me, Myke Towers, Brray . . . [we] were stuck because we didn't have the reach. Our reach was the island, and the island was frozen." It was back to retail: Rauw had started working at Nordstrom and put in a request to be transferred anywhere. He was sent to New Jersey, where he ground out another year. Finally, in 2019, Duars promised him a small salary if he returned to the island and did nothing but crank music out in the studio. Rauw rushed back home.

SPENDING HOURS IN a studio was just one part of what Rauw was envisioning. He knew he wanted to do something different onstage, something no other act in Puerto Rico was doing. "I was like, 'There's no Latin dancer right now,' " Rauw says.

Dance is central to reggaeton; it's a genre that's marketed as dance music, after all. Many of the movements associated with reggaeton come from *perreo,* the inherently Black style of dance that the scholar Katelina "Gata" Eccleston describes as "sex with clothes on" and which represents a history of Black resistance. "Reggaeton repurposed the dance movements in perreo to make them more universal," she says. Over the years, artists have woven other strains of dance into the genre: Vico C, a rapper who is considered one of the founding fathers of reggaeton, used to bring B-boy flair and hip-hop-inspired choreography to his shows and music videos in the Nineties. Before a knee injury, Randy Ortiz from the duo Jowell & Randy would break into pop-and-lock moves in his early career days, something Rauw loved. Lenny Tavárez and Nio Garcia dance as well, though their scale isn't as global as Rauw's.

Puerto Rican pop artists like Chayanne and Ricky Martin, the ones Rauw looked up to as a kid, were also known for high-energy, boy-band-style moves. But Rauw also wanted to channel English-language showmen, particularly Usher, Justin Timberlake, and Chris Brown. ("Rauw is super influenced by American culture," Diaz says.) He wanted to do what they were doing, and his admiration was intense – he would even follow the Instagram accounts of background dancers who had worked with Brown.

One of those guys was Burgos, a striking Puerto Rican performer with reddish-brown hair cascading down his back. Born in Bayamón and raised partly in Florida, Burgos did six tours with Brown and had been teaching dance workshops in Puerto Rico. He remembers when Rauw showed up to one of them in 2018, wearing a black T-shirt with *Sesame Street*'s Count von Count on it: "In walks with this guy with the new wavy look, with the braids," Burgos recalls. "He was hip, new-school." People in the [*Cont. on 78*]

THE 25 MOST STYLISH MUSICIANS NOW

"IF YOU really want to entertain an audience," David Bowie told an interviewer in 1976, "you have to look the part." And from the Beatles' moptops to the Ramones' leather jackets to Run-DMC's Adidas, the look of music has been every bit as impactful as the sound. This has never been more true than today, when trendsetters like Beyoncé or A$AP Rocky or Doja Cat can create huge viral moments that instantly reshape the zeitgeist. As a result, fashion has become one of music's fastest-growing revenue centers — whether that means artists inking major deals with established brands (as BTS did when they became ambassadors for Louis Vuitton) or bumrushing the boardroom with their own innovative lines (like Rihanna's Fenty and Kanye West's Yeezy). That's why *Rolling Stone* will be increasing its fashion coverage in the years to come, starting with this ranking of the 25 most fashionable musicians right now, voted on by a select group of journalists, designers, and industry insiders. In making the list, we focused on artists who are both conceptually cool and culturally important — from Lil Nas X inventing his own queer-country universe to Lizzo redefining plus-size for women all over the world. They aren't just turning heads, they're making history, and *Rolling Stone* will be there to capture it.

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LIL NAS X

JEFF KRAVITZ/GETTY IMAGES

"COWBOY hat from Gucci/Wrangler on my booty," Lil Nas X drawled on "Old Town Road," delivering his revolutionary manifesto. Over the past year, with the help of stylist Hodo Musa, he's managed to turn his every look into a conversation starter, from the flame-emblazoned leather outfit seen on *SNL* to his take on Marie Antoinette's rococo gowns and his now-infamous Satan shoes. "I've grown to love more of what a look can be than the actual fashion itself," he told *GQ Style* last May. "Fashion is one of those things that I can use to feed that part of me that loves to step into new areas." **KYLE RICE**

2 LADY GAGA

SINCE BURSTING onto the pop scene in 2008, Lady Gaga has been the queen of avant-garde looks. "I love becoming art," the singer told *British Vogue,* reflecting on her evolution, from the legendary meat dress to her drag alter ego Jo Calderone. All along, she's found a way to mix future-forward styles with nods to more classic designers, wearing everything from Alexander McQueen to Versace, and making it her own. In 2021, she took a huge step as both a fan and a student of the fashion world, starring as Maurizio Gucci's vengeful wife in the blockbuster *House of Gucci*. Her latest era finds her honoring the Italian luxury house with stunning Old Hollywood glamour. **BRITTANY SPANOS**

CARDI B

CARDI B'S FASHION sense is as effortlessly bold as her raps. Not everyone can seamlessly blend the coveted threads of Chanel and tawdry pieces from Fashion Nova, but she does it with ease. In 2019, Cardi stepped out at the Met Gala in a duvet designed to look like a quilted vagina and still looked chic; a year later, she made Mugler bodysuits cool in the "WAP" video. As her go-to stylist Kollin Carter recently told *Women's Wear Daily,* "If I could describe her style, I would say drama." Carter has been behind many of the rapper's wildest, riskiest looks, but it all works because Cardi is in complete control of her image, wearing each new piece with convincing appeal. "Elegance takes it all, every time," she once said. **K.R.**

ADJACENT PAGE, FROM TOP: VIANNEY LE CAER/INVISION/AP; NEIL MOCKFORD/GC IMAGES; THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MARC PIASECKI/GETTY IMAGES; RICKY VIGIL M/GC IMAGES; ZZ/KGC-168/STAR MAX/IPX/AP; KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF LOUIS VUITTON

4 BTS

FEW ARTISTS have moved menswear forward more than BTS — mainly because their definition of menswear includes everything from oversize suits to blinged-out matador jackets and sequined blouses on tour. BTS have always been as adventurous with their fashion as they are with their music, breaking down gender norms one leather corset at a time. **TIM CHAN**

5 HARRY STYLES

"CLOTHES ARE there to have fun with and experiment with and play with," Harry Styles told *Vogue* in 2020. "When you take away 'There's clothes for men and there's clothes for women'…obviously you open up the arena in which you can play." The former One Direction member turned solo superstar's free-spirited fashion sense has helped make him a new-school style icon in the gender-fluid footsteps of Seventies and Eighties heroes — especially David Bowie and Prince. With guidance from his longtime stylist Harry Lambert, Styles has put a sexy, disco-leaning spin on menswear, often inspiring his fans to show up at his concerts imitating his penchant for boas, flared pants, and bold, psychedelic colors. As Lambert recently said of his work with Styles, "I think any time fashion creates a dialogue, that's positive." **B.S.**

6 MALUMA

THE COLOMBIAN SUPERSTAR, a regular fixture at fashion shows, has never been afraid to take colorful, ultra-embellished risks: At the 2021 MTV VMAs, Maluma went with an all-leather custom Roberto Cavalli bondage suit. Offstage, he's worked with Louis Vuitton, Dolce & Gabbana, and Balmain; he teamed up with the latter's Olivier Rousteing earlier last year to release a *Miami Vice*-inspired capsule collection, describing it as "high couture with a bit of *Papi Juancho*." **JULYSSA LOPEZ**

THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: THEO WARGO/GETTY IMAGES; RAYNER ALBA PHRAA; CHARLES GUERIN/ABACA/SIPA USA/AP

7 RIHANNA

SURE, SHE'S been absent from the music sphere lately, but that's because Rihanna has been busy bringing her relaxed style to the masses. In 2021, she delivered another noteworthy show with her size-inclusive lingerie line, Savage X Fenty, and turned the streets of New York into her runway in vintage Dior. She also continued setting a new bar in luxury and casual wear. At the Met Gala, she paired an ordinary black beanie with couture, and she has stepped out for date nights with A$AP Rocky (left) in chic leather jackets. "I never just wanted to put my name on something and sell my license," she said. "I'm very hands-on." **K.R.**

8 A$AP ROCKY

"I'M THE motherfuckin' lord of this fashion shit," A$AP Rocky boasted on his 2014 single "Multiply." The New York rapper has spent his entire career backing up the claim, from collecting pieces of work from cult designer Rick Owens to collaborating with PacSun in a revamp of its brand early last year. All along, he's maintained a fiercely individualistic aversion to flashy trends. "I wear what I want and what I like," he told *Fast Company* in 2015. "That's why I'm wearing old Raf Simons jeans, beat-up Alexander Wang boots, and a distressed Vlone T-shirt." **K.R.**

10

DUA LIPA

IF 2020 WAS THE YEAR that Dua Lipa ascended to stardom (see the six Grammy nods she got for her disco-centric album *Future Nostalgia*), then 2021 was the year the singer came into her own as a budding style icon. From collaborating with Puma to becoming the face of Versace, Lipa is a fashion chameleon who coolly rides the line between streetwear and high street without missing a beat. "It's kind of like music," she explained to Refinery29 in 2018. "Fashion can't be forced." At Versace's spring-summer 2021 show in Milan, the singer walked the runway in a black skirt suit, then closed things down in a barely-there magenta gown. As Donatella Versace wrote to Lipa on Instagram afterward, "You are as much a star on the runway as you are on stage." **T.C.**

10

SOLANGE

WHEN IT COMES to understanding the sense of wonder that comes with getting dressed, Solange Knowles is in a league of her own. "It's the way that we communicate to people before we even open our mouths," she has said. Knowles was years ahead of the current Gen Z nostalgia for the aughts, and throughout her career she has traversed style the way a hip-hop producer might thumb through samples. For an example, check the music video for 2019's "Binz," in which she cavorts in front of a low-fi camera, as TikTok-paced jump-cuts transport us to increasingly brilliant looks. **JEFF IHAZA**

THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: DAVID M. BENETT/GETTY IMAGES; 2: JMENTERNATIONAL/GETTY IMAGES; JORDAN STRAUSS/INVISION/AP; IBRAHEM HASAN; DAVID X PRUTTING/BFA/YEEZY; CHRIS PIZZELLO/INVISION/AP; RICH FURY/GETTY IMAGES

11 KANYE WEST

AS POLARIZING as his creations as a designer have been, Kanye West has set his own standard in combining music and fashion. Last summer, while debuting *Donda* at Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz Stadium, West donned a black spiked jacket from Balenciaga. "He makes me come out of my comfort zone," said Balenciaga's creative director, Demna Gvasalia. Meanwhile, West is keeping his Yeezy line accessible, joining forces with the Gap. "I'm only concerned with making beautiful products available to as many people as possible," he said in 2015. **K.R.**

12 BEYONCÉ

WHETHER she's masterminding her Ivy Park line — where she recently channeled Black-cowboy culture into a series of rodeo-inspired looks — or appearing in a luxe Tiffany campaign alongside Jay-Z, Beyoncé's fashion sense is constantly evolving, ever-adaptable, and enduringly influential. She's as comfortable dressed down in bell-bottom jeans as she is glammed up at the Grammys, where the singer stunned last year in a Schiaparelli off-the-shoulder leather dress and matching gloves while picking up her 28th win. "You can be curvy and still be a fashion icon," Beyoncé told *Harper's Bazaar* in 2021, discussing her refusal to be put in any kind of box, visual or otherwise. "I wish this freedom for every person." **T.C.**

13 MOSES SUMNEY

"WHAT I LOVE from West African culture are the silhouettes," Moses Sumney recently told *Rolling Stone,* summing up his style philosophy. It's a testament to his confidence that the Ghanaian American singer-songwriter can fill a space with his presence, even when dressed entirely in different shades of black ("vampiric" is one word he has used to describe his aesthetic). The son of two pastors, Sumney has often been inspired by the "draped" looks of his father's robes, favoring garments that seem to flow off his body. As he told *W* in 2018, "I'm quite over the tailored suit being the only option for men." **K.R.**

14

LIZZO

SINCE LIZZO broke through with hits like "Truth Hurts" and "Good as Hell," the "bop star" has created a revolution in high fashion, specifically when it comes to the types of looks sported by plus-size stars. Both on global stages and her thirst-trap-laden Instagram, the singer and flutist has helped challenge and crumble long-held body standards that have gate-kept the fashion industry for anyone over size 2. At Cardi B's birthday party in October, Lizzo turned heads in a gorgeous and completely sheer purple iridescent gown, while at last year's Grammys, she stunned in Balmain. "I'm so grateful to be a part of moving the conversation in fashion forward for bigger bodies and Black women," she told *Vogue* in 2020. **B.S.**

KELSEY LU

15

L.A.-BASED AVANT-POP cellist and singer-songwriter Kelsey Lu has always had an eclectic approach to fashion, mixing cutting-edge looks with antiquated and soulful finds. "I grew up going to thrift stores a lot with my parents, and I think that kind of shaped ways of me just playing with things that already have a life within them," they told Refinery29 in 2016. "I'm trying to marry that with younger, up-and-coming designers." Lu's recent video, for "Love & Validation," shows their aesthetic range, as they transition from sleek black leather to a minimal, tribal look, with their hair arranged into a striking crown. **K.R.**

THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: MEGA/GC IMAGES; SAMANTHA DEITCH/BFA; KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES; SCOTT LEGATO/GETTY IMAGES; GREG SWALES

16 MACHINE GUN KELLY

MACHINE GUN KELLY'S approach to fashion mirrors his constantly shifting musical style. "I don't like things to be still," he told *Vogue* upon rolling out his gender-neutral nail-polish line, Un/Dn Laqr, last year. "I never was a fan of calm water." His goth-glam looks always seem designed for maximum impact: the hot-pink suit he sported at the 2020 VMAs; the dyed-black tongue (matching his unbuttoned black suit) from last year's Billboard Awards; or his coordinated ensembles with girlfriend Megan Fox. "He always knows how to turn the dial up to 110 percent in the most rad way possible," MGK stylist Adam Ballheim told *ET*. **T.C.**

17 ROSALÍA

A QUICK WALK through Rosalía's music videos reveals a personal aesthetic that's eclectic, provocative, and made up of folk and contemporary influences smashed together. She poses in a fuzzy Didu-designed coat and Mordekai custom nails in "Aute Cuture," and punctuates her tiny "WAP" cameo with red latex. For her 18 million Instagram followers, she's quick to showcase pieces by Balmain, Gaultier, and Givenchy alongside oversize anime T-shirts and casual sportswear. "I'm not really about finding a middle ground. I like extremes," she told *Vogue* last year while name-checking the streetwear brand Skoot, the fusionists at Palomo Spain, and the avant-garde goth king Rick Owens, who dressed her for the 2021 Met Gala. "It's about how things make you feel when you see them. What colors grab your attention, how a texture makes you feel when you touch it." **J.L.**

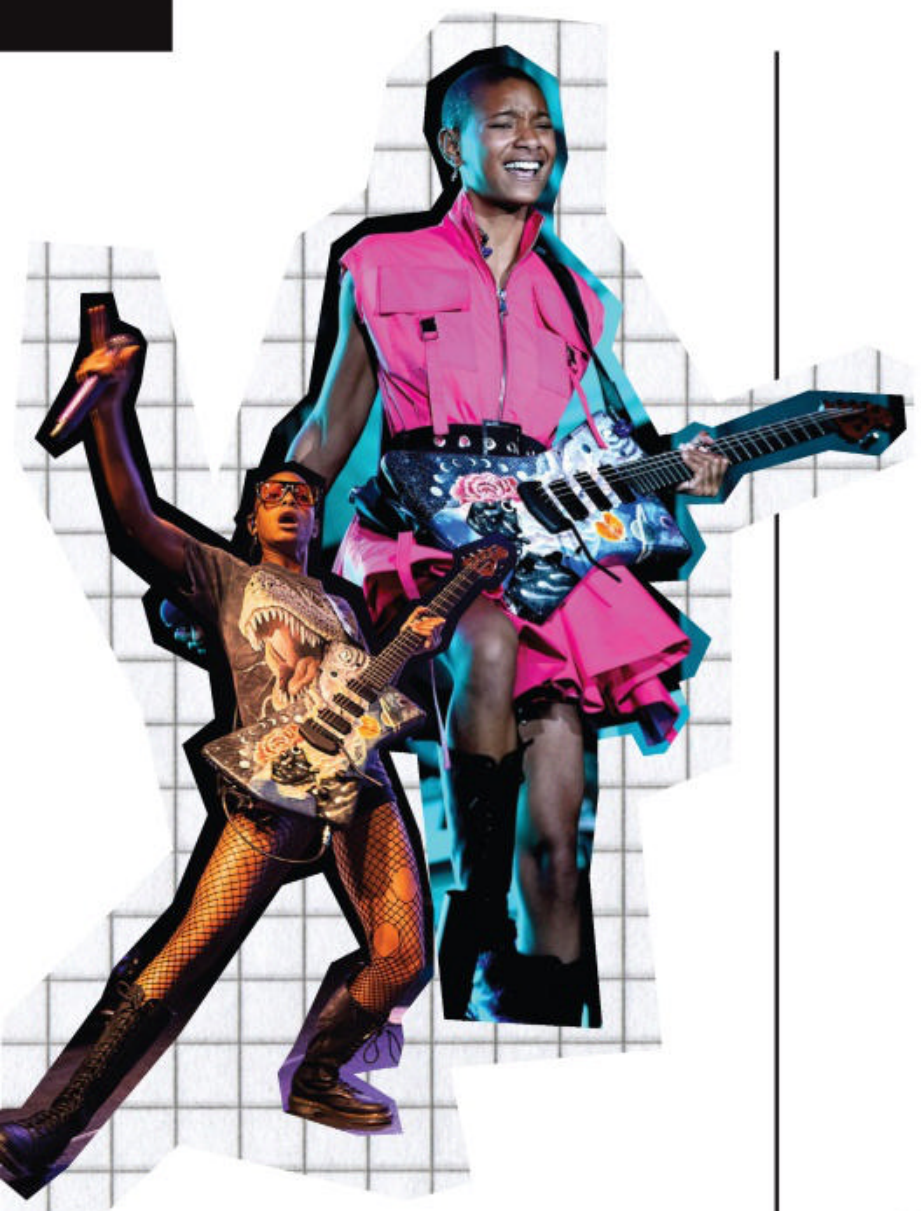
20 DOJA CAT

IN KEEPING with her outer-space-themed album *Planet Her,* Doja Cat has honed an other-worldly fashion sense both onstage and on red carpets, pulling looks as sexy and weird as her songs. Designer Michael Ngo and costume director Brett Alan Nelson have crafted much of her custom stage attire for her festival sets, and Ngo has thanked Doja's team on Instagram for inviting him into her "dystopian fairytale world." To top off her alien-Cinderella moment, Doja even accepted a VMA last year in a padded, full-body quilt dress by Thom Browne. "I never thought I'd be dressed as a worm accepting an award," she joked. **B.S.**

19 RINA SAWAYAMA

LIKE HER INNOVATIVE sound, equally influenced by early-2000s pop and nu metal, Rina Sawayama's style has been marked by an avant-garde approach, delivering feminine silhouettes with extra bite. Since bursting onto the scene a few years back, the British Japanese rule breaker has embraced elements of extravagant fantasy in her looks, like the tulle-frenzied violet Balmain gown she wore to the Brit Awards last spring. "I get a lot of inspiration from Instagram and 1990s to 2000s fashion archives," she told *Gay Times*. "I love switching it up because the fashion concept really provides the job of a character onstage — it allows me to reinterpret the song or performance in many different ways without having to change anything about the song." **K.R.**

THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: RICH FURY/GETTY IMAGES; CHIESKA FORTUNE SMITH; JEFF HAHNE/GETTY IMAGES; FILMMAGIC; KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES



20 WILLOW

WILLOW SMITH defined herself as a fashion renegade right from the start, when the then–nine-year-old sported a spiked blue vest and several rainbow-colored ‘dos in her “Whip My Hair” video. “Me and Jaden, when we were younger . . . we would wear the craziest things,” she told Pharrell Williams in *Interview* in 2016. Since then, her style has been as free-spirited as her music. Her turn toward pop punk on last year’s *Lately I Feel Everything* also informed her stage outfits, like the hot-pink dress she paired with black combat boots during her Life Is Beautiful festival appearance. In 2021, she also modified her look in real time, shaving her head on camera while performing (what else?) “Whip My Hair.” “Honestly, performing with a shaved head is the freest feeling,” the singer told collaborator Travis Barker during a *Rolling Stone* Musicians on Musicians interview last year. **B.S.**

21 BAD BUNNY

LAST YEAR, when he decided to break into the WWE, Bad Bunny turned Wrestlemania into a runway with his own spin on the sport’s camp masculinity. “They have long hair, they can paint their face, [but] they’re strong and powerful beings,” he said of his ring peers. That kind of daring is nothing new for the Latin pop star — from his acrylic nails to his full-drag “Yo Perreo Sola” video. His few 2021 live appearances were just as inventive, mixing goth-y looks onstage and bold suits at awards shows. **B.S.**

27 MÅNESKIN

WITH A BLUR OF BDSM HARNESSES, heavy black eyeliner, tailored suits, and a shit-ton of skin, these Italian rockers blew up in 2021 by bringing back vintage Bowie-Queen swagger — and made the U.S. pop charts doing it. Måneskin formed in the mid-2010s, working a pretty standard emo-punk look. That changed when they hooked up with Italian stylist Nicolò Cerioi, who helped amp up their glam quotient, culminating in Måneskin winning the 2021 Eurovision song contest decked out in custom Etro leather suits. "Fundamentally we try to have fun experimenting with looks, without setting limits but just wearing what we like," bass player Victoria De Angelis told *Women's Wear Daily* in May 2021. **K.R.**

26 TYLER, THE CREATOR

LOTS OF MUSICIANS aspire to make style look easy, but few embody the idea as well as Tyler, the Creator. He came onto the scene with a dose of brash sartorial chaos, almost single-handedly bringing streetwear to the mainstream. Now, it seems the 30-year-old hip-hop rebel has graduated to full-fledged fashion iconoclast, making cardigans in Italy out of the softest mohair you've ever touched, designing luggage to compete with Rimowa, and creating perfumes inspired by Lake Tahoe. He's even positioning himself on the front lines of the nail-polish-for-men movement, dropping a Lake Geneva-inspired unisex line. Last year, Tyler's invite-only Golf Le Fleur pop-up included some of his most ambitious offerings yet. **J.I.**

24 KAI

FEW K-POP stars are as beloved by designers throughout the world as Kai, the pretty, pouty-faced singer, rapper, and dancer from the groups Exo and SuperM. Kai's style runs the gamut from preppy to punk, and he deftly mixes fashion influences (and accessories!) as easily as he mixes musical genres, with a sartorial swagger that's at once cool and coy. The ab-baring crop top he wears in Exo's "Obsession" music video cemented his sex-symbol status, while promo pics for his latest EP, *Peaches,* saw him sporting everything from laid-back denim to hanbok-inspired garb. "I go around picking clothes myself," he said in a recent interview. "Concept is the most important thing. We have to think about whether we want to play it safe or take up a challenge." Brands are beginning to take notice too, with Gucci appointing Kai as its first-ever global ambassador from Korea. **T.C.**

25 GRIMES

GRIMES GREW UP in the Nineties, and her colorful style draws from multiple eras of the decade, from rave to grunge and goth. But there's nothing rehashed about the singer's looks, which are firmly planted in the future. Case in point: the Iris van Herpen dress she debuted at the 2021 Met Gala, complete with metallic face mask and sword made from a melted-down assault rifle. Inspired by the sci-fi epic *Dune,* Grimes is using fashion not just to tell stories but also to make a statement. As her stylist, Turner, told *The New York Times,* Grimes isn't merely playing dress-up, "She's a representation of a woman that is powerful." **T.C.**

THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: KRISTY SPAROW/GETTY IMAGES; SACHA LECCA; DANIELE VENTURELLI/GETTY IMAGES; THEO WARGO/GETTY IMAGES

VOTERS

For *Rolling Stone*'s inaugural list of the 25 Most Stylish Musicians Now, we selected a panel of voters from throughout the fashion world. They were asked to pick and rank 20 musicians (the definition of "stylish" was up to them). Votes were tabulated, with the highest-ranked musician on each list receiving 250 points, the second-highest 240 points, and so on down to 60 points for number 20. More than 113 musicians received at least one vote.

Aquaria
DRAG PERFORMER, DJ, AND MODEL

Zerina Akers
AWARD-WINNING COSTUME DESIGNER AND STYLIST

Ella Emhoff
ARTIST, FASHION DESIGNER, AND MODEL

Jared Eng
STYLIST AND FOUNDER OF JUST JARED

Harry Fisher
BUYING AND SALES DIRECTOR

Evan Ross Katz
WRITER, FASHION COLUMNIST, AND PODCAST HOST

Peter Ash Lee
PHOTOGRAPHER, DIRECTOR, AND EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF *BURDOCK*

Recho Omondi
FASHION DESIGNER AND PODCASTER

Bruce Pask
FASHION DIRECTOR AT BERGDORF GOODMAN

Bretman Rock
FASHION, BEAUTY, AND COMEDY PERSONALITY

Olivier Rousteing
FASHION DESIGNER AND CREATIVE DIRECTOR OF BALMAIN

Turner
STYLIST

Bobby Wesley
IMAGE CONSULTANT

HER VULNERABLE SONGWRITING MADE HER A STAR. MAKING HER PEACE WITH WHAT THAT MEANT WAS HARDER

By Angie Martoccio

Mitski

Had to Quit Music to Love It

Photographs by *Josefina Santos*

HEARTBREAKER
Mitski in New York, 2021

MITSKI HAS BEEN having nightmares. The 31-year-old musician has always suffered from performance-anxiety dreams, but lately they've gotten more terrifying, more elaborate. During one in particular, her cat was stuck in a tree, and she was late to soundcheck. When she finally arrived at the venue, she found out she'd be performing with an orchestra she'd never rehearsed with.

"Everyone was side-eyeing me," she recalls. "As I was trying to do vocal warmups, the whole orchestra was like, 'That's a good idea!' and started doing vocal warmups too. I couldn't hear myself, so I kept trying to go deeper and deeper into the venue . . . and then I got lost."

Perhaps the dreams are about the fact that Mitski is preparing to return to the road after nearly two years at home. Or maybe it's because the last time she was on a stage, in late 2019, it was supposed to be the final show of her career. Either way, on second thought, she'd rather not talk about it. "Talking about dreams is boring, isn't it?" she asks.

For the most alluring and enigmatic musician in indie rock, that's hardly the case. Mitski's music speaks to something deep within her audience, from the devotees who tattoo her lyrics on their bodies to the more casual fans who created so many TikToks featuring her 2018 single "Nobody" that pop-culture sites were forced to run explainers. She answered the door today in low-key civilian clothes – light-wash denim jeans, a lavender long-sleeved shirt, and primrose Brooks running shoes – that are a slight shock after the last time the world saw her, in her onstage costume from two years ago of biker shorts and knee pads.

Associate editor ANGIE MARTOCCIO *wrote about Snail Mail in the December issue.*

It's early November, and we're meeting at the Bomb Shelter, a studio in Nashville. Halloween is over, and she isn't happy about it. "Maybe I'll watch a horror movie," she says. "I can make October last as long as I want."

Walking inside the Bomb Shelter feels like entering a friend's secret clubhouse – or maybe it's what *Succession*'s Kendall Roy wanted the VIP section of his 40th-birthday party to actually look like. The space is cozy, with vinyl-record sleeves covering the wood walls and ceiling. Plants that have seen better days adorn the kitchen counter, next to a cast-iron skillet hanging from a shelf and a gigantic jug of honey on top of a microwave. Margo Price's family Christmas card is taped next to a fire extinguisher.

Mitski makes me a cup of sencha tea while mumbling corny jokes, boiling water ("You know what they say about a watched pot . . .") and pouring it into a mug with the iconic New York logo ("Do you *love* New York?"). She moved to Nashville two years ago, though she told virtually no one about it at the time. "I think I'm becoming attached to Nashville," she says thoughtfully. "I didn't want to do L.A. or New York, because I felt I shouldn't live in incredibly competitive, expensive cities when I'm quitting my job."

Except Mitski didn't quit. It was here, in this studio, that she made a new album and realized she still had a lot left to create.

MITSKI KNEW THE STAKES were high when she performed to a sold-out crowd at Central Park's Summerstage on Sept. 8, 2019. It was the final night on her tour for 2018's acclaimed *Be the Cowboy,* and when she'd announced it as her last show "indefinitely," her fans had freaked out, to put it mildly. Memes of crying animals with the single word "yeehaw" and declarations like "I'm so glad I'm seeing her this week or else I would've died right here and now" were not uncommon. The reaction was so frenzied that she had to issue a clarification on Twitter weeks before the show: "Y'all, I'm not quitting music!" she wrote. "I've been on non-stop tour for over five years, I haven't had a place to live during this time, & I sense that if I don't step away soon, my self-worth/identity will start depending too much on staying in the game, in the constant churn."

It was all true – except for the first part. In reality, Mitski fully intended to leave the music business behind for good after that night. "I was thinking this was the last show I would perform ever, and then I would quit and find another life," she says now. This is probably why it turned out to be one of the greatest performances of her career – it felt precious, finite. The crowd seemed a little more hypnotized than usual, her signature choreography a little too sharp. "This is all I ever wanted in my life," she told the audience that had just watched her lie faceup on a table, singing into the night sky.

"It was beautiful," Mitski says. "I performed, and I remembered how much I loved it. And I remember walking offstage, and I immediately started crying. Like, 'What have I done?' "

Lucy Dacus, who opened for Mitski that night, remembers that Mitski seemed muted as she left the stage. "I asked her, 'How do you feel?' " Dacus says. "The first thing she said was, 'Oh, I've made a huge mistake.' She verbalized it, and I felt a shade of terror for her."

Looking back on it now, Mitski says the long years of nonstop touring weren't the real reason she wanted to quit. Even when life on the road can be exhausting, it's nothing a break between album cycles can't fix. Many artists stay home, log off social media, and recharge, before eventually turning to new projects. For Mitski, it was more complicated than that. *Be the Cowboy* had turned her into an indie star – the kind whose fans feel an intense connection with a person they've never met – and she was grappling with what that meant for her life.

"I felt it was shaving away my soul little by little," she says. "The music industry is this supersaturated version of consumerism. You are the product being consumed, bought, and sold. Even the people on your team who are your friends, the very foundation of your dynamic is that they get a percentage of your income. Every time I turned something down, it would mean that they would make less money."

Mitski is speaking slowly now, trying to recall the series of events. Not only is it her first interview since before the pandemic, but, she says, the isolation of lockdown made her memory worse than it already is. ("It got so bad, to the point where I was living in a white room with nothing in it," she says.) She's sitting on a charcoal couch at the Bomb Shelter in socks, her shoes neatly positioned on the floor in front of her. She ordered vegan doughnuts from Five Daughters Bakery, cutting two in half for us on the nearby coffee table.

> ***"In order for me to survive in the music industry, I had to stuff a pillow over my heart and be like, 'Shut up.' After a few years, my heart really did go numb."***

"In order for me to survive in the music industry as it exists, I had to stuff a pillow over my heart and tell it to stop screaming, and be like, 'Shut up, shut up, take it,' " she says finally. "After a few years of doing that every single day, my heart really did start to go numb and go silent. And the problem with that is that I actually need my heart – my feelings – in order to write music. It was this paradox."

Being a popular musician, it seems, worked for her until one day it simply didn't. "This is what really made me quit," she says. "I could see a future self, who would put out music for the sake of keeping the machine running. And that really scared me."

MITSKI CLAIMS SHE is "bad at naming things," but her five previous albums suggest otherwise. Her titles (*Retired From Sad, New Career in Business*; *Bury Me at Makeout Creek*; *Puberty 2*) form a wry running commentary on twentysomething angst, raw desire, and often unrequited love. She named her latest, *Laurel Hell,* after

FASHION DIRECTION BY ALEX BADIA. HAIR STYLED BY BRITTAN WHITE FOR EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS. MAKEUP BY TODD HARRIS FOR HONEY ARTISTS USING SUQQU COSMETICS. SET DESIGN BY ELISIA MIRABELLI FOR B&A REPS. STYLED BY LIZZY ROSENBERG. PREVIOUS SPREAD: DRESS BY THREEASFOUR. THIS SPREAD: BODY CAST BY KIM MESCHES. DRESS, BODYSUIT, AND PANTS BY MELITTA BAUMEISTER.

a folk term for the thickets of mountain laurel found deep in the southern Appalachians. The flowers are gorgeous, like little rhododendrons, but the plant is poisonous, with low, twisted branches that are impossible to pass through. "There are laurel hells that are named after people who died in them, supposedly," she says.

Although she's never seen one in person, the concept of trying to break free of such an entanglement appealed to Mitski. "It was just too perfect," she says. "I'm stuck inside this maze . . . I can't get out, but it's beautiful." This imagery trickles into the first line of *Laurel Hell,* which Mitski sings in a tone as spooky as the films she binges on her Shudder account: "Let's step carefully into the dark . . ." She explains the song as a metaphor for the way her art exposes her secrets. "I don't show even the people I love most, but I'll show you this darkness in me," she tells me.

Mitski wrote "Working for the Knife," the single that marked her return to music, toward the end of 2019. Only a few weeks earlier, she'd been sure she was exiting the music business, but she'd since been reminded that she owed her label, Dead Oceans, another record. "I contractually had to release it," she says. "I just didn't know whether I would ask the label to take it and keep me out of it, or I would actually go out and present it."

By early 2020, she had made up her mind. "Working for the Knife" details her painful reluctance to return to the stage over ominous synths: "I used to think I'd be done by 20/Now at 29, the road ahead appears the same."

In the song's video, Mitski silently enters a Brutalist concrete auditorium and sheds her cowboy hat – a cheeky send-off to her *Be the Cowboy* era – before working up to a stylized outburst of choreography, slamming her palms on the floor, chaotically jumping up and down, and thrusting her head every which way so her hair becomes a shiny, majestic blur. The camera closes in on her at the end, exhausted and sprawled on the ground. "What it came down to was, 'I have to do this even though it hurts me, because I love it,' " Mitski says. " 'This is who I am. . . . I'm going to keep getting hurt, and I'm still going to do it, because this is the only thing I can do.' "

Mitski describes "Working for the Knife" as the beacon of the record, the compass she'd use to find her way back if she veered off the path. Because *Laurel Hell* is the longest she's ever spent on an album – most of the songs were written in 2018 – this happened quite a lot.

"This album went through so many iterations," she says. "This album has been a punk record at some point, and a country record. Then, after a while, it was like, 'I need to dance.' Even though the lyrics might be depressing, I need something peppy to get me through this."

"The Only Heartbreaker" is a disco-ball rager that sounds like Kate Bush meets A-ha. "I needed that *Breakfast Club* dance-sequence music," she says. She wrote it with Semisonic's Dan Wilson, the professional hitmaker who has worked with Taylor Swift, Adele, the Chicks, and others; their collaboration marks Mitski's first time having a co-writer on one of her albums. "That was a real struggle," she says. "I'd held on so long to my music being mine."

The song had gone through at least 20 revisions and was about to be left off the record entirely before Mitski met Wilson in Los Angeles, during a co-writing session for other musicians. "The song was sitting in my head for too long and rotting," she recalls. "I was like, 'This is a person who has much more experience than me. Maybe I could punt this to him.' And I'm glad I did, because he did come through and lead me to conclusions that I wouldn't have arrived at otherwise."

> ***"What it comes down to is, 'I have to do this even though it hurts, because I love it. This is who I am. I'm going to keep getting hurt, and I'm still going to do it.'"***

Lyrically, what makes "The Only Heartbreaker" so potent is that it flips the traditional pop-songwriting narrative in which the protagonist is hurt and we take their side – a perspective that Mitski has nailed on past songs, like the subtly spellbinding "Washing Machine Heart" and the lovesick anthem "Your Best American Girl." This time, she embraces the role of the bad guy.

"I've often found myself in a situation where, narratively speaking, I'm the bad guy," she says. "We can acknowledge more than just black and white. If you present something that feels true to you, there will be other people who are like, 'This is true to me too.' "

WHEN MITSKI Miyawaki was a child, she went through a phase where she would start every sentence with "No," for reasons that still puzzle her today. "You'd be like, 'Do you like apples?' " she remembers. "I'd be like, 'No! I like apples.' I guess that's an easy way to get someone's attention, or assert yourself immediately."

It's an endearing memory that paints the portrait of a young Mitski. Her father worked in the U.S. State Department, so her family moved frequently, living everywhere from Japan, where she was born, to Turkey to Alabama. She was always the new kid, the one who told unsolicited ghost stories to her peers and woke up first at sleepovers. "I ran into the parent in the kitchen and small-talked, and put breakfast together for myself while everyone else was sleeping," she recalls with a smile. "I was *that* kid."

In the eight years she's spent getting national press, Mitski has frequently been described as "private." She avoids talking in detail about her family, saying that her parents are retired and her little sister is "a really good person," and she kindly requests that I don't reveal her cat's name for fear of being tracked down. "The stuff I'm not candid about is when it affects other people," she says. "I have people in my life who aren't in the public, and I don't feel like I have a right to talk about them when they never consented to this dynamic." But the truth is that Mitski is quite candid and open – during our many hours together, she never once declines to answer a question. It's time to debunk the idea that she's an especially secretive person, and she'd like to have a word about it.

"I have developed this theory about this," she begins. "When the world put me in this position, I didn't realize that I was making this deal where in exchange for giving me this platform and attention, I was supposed to give myself."

That's not how it worked in the world where she began playing music, she continues: "I came from a DIY punk scene where there are a bunch of white-guy bands, and they got to just put out music, go on tour, and then go home. I thought that applied to me. I didn't realize that I was breaking this contract that I'd entered into. Keeping some things to myself makes people very, very angry. Because they might not be conscious of it, but they think I have not come through on my end of the deal."

She references the infamous *Esquire* profile of Megan Fox from 2013, where the writer compared the star to a human sacrifice. "It was ridiculed at the time, but I thought it made a good point," she says. "We have it hard-wired in our brain that we need this ritual. We prop up a beautiful woman and then shit on her and destroy her. Thankfully, I am 31 now, so maybe I don't qualify anymore."

Mitski turned 30 in September 2020, and celebrated at home in lockdown. "No exaggeration, I woke up and shed one single tear because I was so fucking glad to be out of my twenties," she says. She spent much of that year making vegan baked goods (particularly pies), bingeing horror films, and gardening. "The real me is not living some idealized life," she says. "I'm just on a couch, watching TV. My fans should not meet me because they would be disappointed."

She finds it comforting to think of the space that separates the person watching *The Haunting of Hill House* and planting cucumbers from the artist whose music has magnetized Iggy Pop and Dave Grohl. "I wouldn't say it's an alter ego, but I have anxiety around social situations, and I don't like going to parties," she says. "As a performer, onstage I know my place. I'm sure of myself. There's no doubt. It's just existing, and it's so lovely to get to be for an hour."

WE MEET UP the next day at Shelby Bottoms Park and embark on a four-mile walk along the Cumberland River. Mitski fits in like a local, arriving in a forest-green fleece sweater with a black backpack, ready to show me around. [*Cont. on 79*]

DRESS AND BODYSUIT BY MELITTA BAUMEISTER

18+

WHAT IS AVAXHOME?

AVAXHOME-

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THE UNDER-COVER NAZI

For decades, he infiltrated biker gangs and white-supremacist groups. Now, he's telling his story to sound the alarm about the threat of far-right extremists in America

BY PAUL SOLOTAROFF

Photograph by **Mike Belleme**

WE'LL COME TO THE HOMEGROWN TERRORISTS HE foiled and the race war they tried to foment. To the journalists he saved from assassination and the synagogue marked for carnage in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. To the gun-rights march on the steps of a state capitol, where they planned to pick off cops and rallygoers. There's time enough to valorize the work of Scott B., an undercover fed who breached far-right death squads and squashed their national web of terror cells. (Scott requested that his surname not be used for the sake of his family's safety.) Last summer, when he retired at 50 from the FBI, Scott left the bureau as one of the most storied agents since Joe Pistone, the real-life Donnie Brasco. For two-plus decades, he cracked landmark cases and won every laurel they give to undercovers. Months out of the game, though, he can't stop brooding over the threat he left behind. He knows better than anyone that it's later than we think, and that each day brings us closer to the next 9/11 – this one launched by our own children. ¶ But first, we need to talk about the ram. Because that ram – actually, a terrified goat with diarrhea – died for all our sins of the past four centuries. ¶ It is Halloween evening 2019, and Scott –

DEEP COVER
"What I do isn't acting, 'cause acting'll get you killed," Scott says. "I'm just out here being darker shades of me."

undercover coordinator for the FBI and special agent dispatched to its Joint Terrorism Task Force – is shivering in three layers, including tactical gear, in the pitch-black woods of northern Georgia. He has infiltrated a domestic-terror group called the Base, posing as a former skinhead who calls himself PaleHorse and is expert in hand-to-hand combat. Scott and 11 Base members are walking an unmarked path to a clearing above a creek bed. He doesn't know most of the men he's with; they've come from far distances to this encampment on a farm for a four-day training block on guerrilla warfare. Five of them traveled from Northeast states with assault rifles and armor in their car trunks. Another, a young psycho who calls himself ZoomGnat, has been up for two days straight on Adderall and Red Bull and has driven from Texas without stopping. None of them call one another by their given names, only their noms de guerre: Pestilence, PunishSnake, BigSiege, etc. Several are ex-military with munitions training and the wherewithal to take out power stations. Others are self-taught tactical freaks who shoot and move as nimbly as paratroopers. The internet will teach you anything these days, including how to start a race war in three steps.

The day had broken mild but turned bone-cold later, and was now, after many hours of slanting rain, a misery of mud and wind. When they came to the clearing, the members lit torches and formed a circle around the fire. Incantations were spoken by one of the men, citing the Wild Hunt and other gross misreadings of pre-Christian and Norse mythology. And then – because this was a sacrament not to the gods but to the massacre of Jews, Blacks, and gays – it was time to sacrifice the trembling animal they'd kidnapped from a neighbor's farm.

The goat, all 80-something pounds of him soaking wet, was shitting and bleating in prostrate fear of these men in death masks and camo. The man leading the ritual – code name: Eisen – swung the machete overhead. He hesitated a moment, then brought the blade down; it bounced off the animal with a whomp. Goats aren't built for ritual kills, as it happens: The scruffs of their necks are double-reinforced with back straps of gristle and fur. After further attempts at holy butchery, someone had the bright idea to just shoot the thing already. But this, too, quickly became a clusterfuck. Eisen looked away as he pointed the pistol – and the members, after all, were in a *circle*. One of them could have died if he misfired.

And so Scott, who in real life is a sniper-grade marksman and who teaches his fellow agents how to shoot, stepped in to school the young neo-Nazi on the rudiments of gun safety. But the goat didn't die after a single head shot; its legs kept flailing, as if to taunt Eisen for being such a weasel. Finally, Eisen put a second slug in him. Now, the dark sacrament could begin.

Someone slit the animal's throat and filled a chalice with the blood that came glomping out. The men passed the chalice around the fire, each taking sips from the cup. By the time it got to Scott, though, the blood had somehow chunked into dim-sum lumps of plasma and – oh, hell no, he's not drinking that mess. He dipped a pinky into the chalice and touched it to his lips as one of the men began to vomit. Not a genteel purge but the full-boat Linda Blair, the contents of his dinner spraying the trees. *Sweet Jesus,* Scott thought as he looked around the campfire at these misfits in training for mayhem. He was the only Christian at this devil's mass, and the only functional adult on hand. While some of the others took hits of acid and spooked themselves by talking to the severed goat's head, Scott stood as close to the fire as he could. "It was so fucking cold, and I couldn't warm up in my truck: I was taping the whole thing on audio recorder."

Scott is telling this story in the study of his farmhouse high up a hill in the Appalachians. It hunches like a fort on its timbered perch, with assault rifles and armor in the linen closet and kill-shot sight lines of the unmarked road running past his drive. As he talks, he screens footage that he took of those men through a hidden cam on his person. It was wildly risky work, taping terrorists with long guns in woods miles from his support team. It is no less risky to be showing this film and revealing these details for mass consumption. Scott has never been named in public, even at criminal trials. So thorough was the evidence he gathered covertly that every defendant he ever arrested pleaded out.

But he's breaking his covenant now for the reason he took that footage: He is haunted by what the people onscreen will do if their movement – and their moment – aren't thwarted. Over months of interviews with Scott and his former colleagues, hours-long conversations with domestic-terror experts, and wormhole dives down fascist portals on apps like Gab and Discord, a portrait emerged of a nation under threat from a thousand points of hate. "We've seen massive increases in plots and acts" committed by domestic terrorists, says Bruce Hoffman, a Georgetown professor and counterterror authority whose *Inside Terrorism* is the master text on the subject. "Me and my team lay awake nights kicking the walls, because there's a million-and-a-half guys online plotting murder," says Rita Katz, the founder and director of the SITE Intelligence Group, and the author of the forthcoming *Saints and Soldiers,* which tracks the rise of far-right terror in the age of Trump. "We're in a business where we can't be wrong once," says Scott. "And there's way more of them than us undercovers."

I ask him how he endured those spectral hours in the company of such fools. Scott stiffens and pulls up pictures on his phone.

"This," he flashes the photo of a teen with a bowl haircut and a sunk-chest, scarecrow build, "is Dylann Roof. He killed nine people in a church."

"And this," he flashes the photo of a crew-cut dork in glasses, "is Patrick Crusius. He's charged with killing 23 at a Walmart in Texas. So don't think for a second you can read these boys by how they look on Twitter."

Then Scott fetches up a meme he pulled off one of the apps where rageful kids meet up. It is a viral poster of the so-called saints who inspire white terrorists worldwide. At the top is Saint Breivik – as in Anders Breivik, the Norwegian who slaughtered 69 people at a summer camp for kids, and another eight in Oslo with a van bomb. Just below him is Saint Tarrant – as in Brenton Tarrant, the Australian who murdered 51 people in a pair of New Zealand mosques. Two down from him is Robert Bowers, the Pennsylvania trucker who allegedly slew 11 at a synagogue in Pittsburgh. This meme is a totem pole for Nazi youth in training, the standings in a pennant race of killers. Bracketing their stat lines is a phrase in block chalk: "Will you make it onto the leaderboard . . . in the fight for white survival?"

"YOU CAN'T READ THESE BOYS BY HOW THEY LOOK ON TWITTER. WE CAN'T BE WRONG ONCE," SAYS SCOTT. "AND THERE'S WAY MORE OF THEM THAN US UNDERCOVERS."

SCOTT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE any guardian you've met, unless by "guardian" you mean the cooler at a Vegas strip joint who keeps the drunks off the girls with a black-eyed glare. He's been lifting all his life and has the setup to prove it: mail-box quads and meat-plow arms that dispose him to sleeveless tees. At six feet four and 260 pounds, he fills up a room without meaning to, though he never wastes time trying to merge with his surroundings. He's funny and profane and could charm a lampshade off its base with his whiskey-sour drawl and Harley swagger. Small wonder that even strangers at the Quik-Mart call him Tex, though he's as much from Amarillo as you or me.

But being a giant with full tat sleeves is its own disguise: No one sees you and thinks "plainclothes cop" hiding cameras in your leathers. That's the trademark of a crack undercover: a genius for playing yourself. "What I do isn't acting, 'cause acting'll get you killed," says Scott. "I'm just out here being darker shades of me." He tartly describes his targets – homicidal bikers who beat their victims with hammers; racist gangsters who pimp out their women under the sobriquet "Aryan angels" – as "my ass-out country cousins," rednecks raised in the same locus he was but who went right when he went left. "If I hadn't've played [foot]ball in college and been friends with lots of Black guys, I might've shared a few of their views," he says. Scott drains the last of his third Jack Daniel's – he drinks the stuff like seltzer – then laughs at the thought of espousing hate. "Yeah, nah, probably not. I ain't big on stupid."

Still, playing Klansmen and hired killers, he had the chops to infiltrate homegrown terror. For 28

Contributing editor PAUL SOLOTAROFF *wrote the true-crime story "The Devil You Know" in September.*

CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER
From top: For Operation Road Kill, Scott went undercover in 2006 to take down the Outlaw motorcycle gang; he infiltrated the Klan for Operation Smoking Robes in 2017, which led to the arrest of a man who was allegedly planning to shoot up a synagogue; graduating from the academy in 1993.

years in law enforcement – first as an investigator a year out of college at a county sheriff's office in the Carolinas, then as a shooting star at the FBI – he's been working his way into, and out of, tight spaces, breaching outfits that chop up cop impostors. Sitting in the crates he brought home when he retired are the field notes and transcripts of every case he's worked. They corroborate the accounts he's giving here and chart the plagues of the past three decades – the flood tide of drugs from the five cartels penetrating our southern border; the poisoning of the suburbs by Big Pharma and the opioid mills they helped spawn; and the radioactive gush of white supremacy through the fire hose of social media. Scott seems almost wistful now to recall the Nineties, when the bogeyman in America was crack cocaine.

By his count, there are 600 FBI agents who are certified as UCEs (undercover employees). But some of them do the work of "backstopping" agents: creating false credentials and social media profiles for UCEs working in the field. Of the several hundred people who do face-to-face ops, most have only handled a couple of cases as the primary undercover. "There's maybe 50 in the country who've done five or more ops – and then the rare few who've done double digits," says Shawn McAlpin, a prolific UCE who retired to run a cannabis dispensary. Scott has done dozens, though they tend to run together; he has, after all, a type. "No one's gonna send me in on corporate crimes; my country ass would be laughed out of the boardroom," he says.

And so he made his name doing the dirty jobs, often juggling several ops at once. He infiltrated the Outlaws – a national biker gang that rivals the Hells Angels in size – and sent 16 members or their associates to prison for guns, drugs, extortion, and violent crimes. Hours before they swung a huge dope deal one night, they summoned Scott to their clubhouse in Taunton, Massachusetts. Scott was kitted out with his standard trousseau: a tiny camera and a recording chip secreted on his person (it would breach tradecraft to say precisely where). They ordered him – at gunpoint – to get naked.

Scott was stunned; he'd been undercover for 18 months and committed six crimes with them already. (Or so they thought.) "Not gonna lie to you: My asshole was knittin' a sweater, going chicka-chicka-chicka as I stripped," he says. They searched Scott and his garments, but missed the microcamera – a providence he chalks up to his god. Later, at one of the strip joints they called home, his adrenaline dump turned to rage. "Fuck you, motherfuckers," Scott hissed, turning purple. "Tomorrow, before the drop, I'm making all you bitches strip!"

Next up was Operation Poetic Justice: a sheriff's office in the hillbilly South dealing drugs, untaxed cigarettes, and taking bribes. "There was so much corruption, it seeped into government, because everyone was related up there," says Mike MacLean, Scott's FBI supervisor in Knoxville. Before Scott and his team took down 50 people, including cops and their family members, he was sitting with a deputy's relative one night when the guy pulled a shotgun, hammers cocked. "I find out you the law, you a dead man," said the relative, baring his toothless gums in a snarl. Months later, after the takedown, Scott sat with the man again, introducing himself as FBI. "Aw, hell, I knew you was law the whole time," said the relative. "Yeah?" said Scott, who hears that often, post-arrest. "Then why'd you sell me coke for a year?" "Oh, that's 'cause I like you," said the man.

Compound that criminal dementia with fanaticism and you get the pretzel logic of white power. In the hate groups that he breached, Scott encountered credos that only cracked-out satirists could conceive. One night, he sat up drinking bourbon with a Klansman who laid out the dual-seed theory. In the Garden of Eden, it was Adam, Eve, and Abel, and Abel, born of Adam, sired the white race. Then came the snake with forbidden fruit – only, the "fruit" was Eve sleeping with the snake. The snake, being Satan, fathered Cain and the mud people, starting off with the Jews. Then, you got your Blacks, gays, commies, and Asians: They're all the seed of Satan, too. Christians can kill them and it ain't a sin to do so, since they're hell spawn who don't have souls.

The names of the demons changed as Scott roved the racist circuit: lizard people, beasts of the field, short-faced bears. The rules changed, too, even under the same flag. Aryan Nation disciples in the state of Tennessee trafficked dope and guns and pimped their girls on Backpage, often to Black and brown johns. This raised the hackles of the Right Rev. Richard Butler, who'd founded Aryan Nations in the Seventies. From his compound in Idaho, he sent cease-and-desist letters to those crystal-tweaking heathens down South. For months, he harassed them to change their name; they told him to go fuck himself. Finally, Butler capitulated: They could call themselves Aryan Nation if they studied Scripture with him. And so it came to pass: The Tennessee apostates got religion and kept selling speed to all comers. Scott busted that crew in 2018, sending 44 members to the pen. "For all their Christian bullshit, they were moving tons of product," he says, and using the criminal proceeds to grow their base.

Asked if he'd challenged them to square the contradiction, Scott lets out a snort. "I'm talking to this neo-Nazi and said, 'Why do y'all hate Blacks so much?' He goes, 'They're lazy, and they mooch off their family and the county.' I said, 'OK, so where you living these days?' 'Um, well, right now, I'm staying by my girlfriend's mama's.' 'Right, and what do you do for work?' 'Well, I'm kinda between jobs at the moment.' I just started laughing and said, 'Is it me, or are you the very thing you just described hating?' "

If Scott had done nothing but "enterprise crimes" – drug gangs, corrupt cops, human-trafficking cases – he'd have blazed a big trail at the bureau. But he was spinning his wheels working narcotics rips and badly wanted out of that box. So in 2015, he arranged his own transfer to the Joint Terrorism Task Force in Tennessee. Created by the bureau in 1980, JTTFs are regional strike teams blending feds, cops, troopers, and linguists tracking terror threats at home. Back then, no one in Washington deemed the far-right groups a high-priority target. "For several years, our unit had been a lackluster crew, not known for having ass kickers," says Scott. That changed in a hurry with him around. He built the case on the Aryan Nations that lasted 18 months. The windfall payoff in arrests and seizures showed DTOS – the Domestic Terror command in Washington – "that you could bring major cases against white supremacists, and that we needed more bodies" to do so, he adds.

The bureau soon doubled the size of his team; Scott spread his reach to other states. Posing as an outlaw biker, he infiltrated a Klan cell suspected of making ghost guns for sale. One night in a remote field in Scottsboro, Alabama, they blindfolded him and ordered him to his knees: He was "naturalized," or inducted, by a green-gowned wizard. For months, he attended their Klan Kraft Klasses and played Lynyrd Skynyrd at their rallies. Scott, who shreds like a poor man's Dave Mustaine, would get four songs in and run out of suitable numbers. "You can't rock Hendrix for the Klan," he says. So he'd wail Southern standards as they doused their 30-foot torch with diesel fuel.

At those Klan meetups, Scott caught wind of a man who was bent on bad intentions. "He'd post pictures of synagogues on his Facebook page and say, 'I'm gonna do something big.' " Scott arranged to meet the man while posing as a closer. (The closer is the guy who supplies the "iron," be it a gun or bomb for an attack.) On Jan. 12, 2017, he picked up Benji McDowell at his home in Conway, South Carolina; they drove to Myrtle Beach to talk targets. "This was right around the time Dylann Roof was on trial," says Scott. "Benji said he wanted to do something in the style of Roof, only on a grander scale."

Scott wasn't sure what to make of McDowell, an overstuffed pillow of a 30-year-old stoner who came off as a soft-brained teen. Countless idiots shitpost heinous threats but lack the will or means to see them through. Scott made McDowell for one of those losers, a sense compounded when he sparked up a joint in the back seat of Scott's sedan. "Put that out!" Scott barked at him, boiling mad. "You don't know what I got in the trunk, or what my priors are!" McDowell was so scared that he swallowed the joint. He later threw up in a parking lot.

But that night, Scott got a call from Benji: "I want a 40-cal and hollow points." Scott returned in February to deliver the gun – minus firing pin, of course. "He was good to go in the next week or two," says Scott. "He had intel on an event at a temple [in Myrtle Beach] where lots of kids and families would be present." The drop-off happened at Scott's motel. Cops swarmed McDowell in the car park. Later, at the station, he gave a rueful confession. "I'm glad y'all stopped me when you did," said McDowell. "I was fixin' to do something bad." Scott notes that McDowell got a wrist slap – 33 months in prison for an illegal weapon. "The loophole is, there's no domestic-terror law: You can't bust a guy for saying 'All Jews must die.' So you wind up working whatever charge you can just to get 'em off the street."

He had no time to brood about sentence guidelines, though: There was another plot afoot at an industrial plant. A white man enraged at his Black superiors sought a bomb to blow up the place. Scott reached out to him through a source, posing again as a closer. But leery of leaving a voice trail, the man declined to talk. Instead, he texted Scott the thing he was after: an emoji of a bomb going *ka-boom*. After months of pinging from his personal phone, the perp switched his aim to the home of his bosses, who happened to be a married couple. Travis Dale Brady was pinched when he took possession of a dummy bomb delivered by the feds. "He was no wiz at op-security," says Scott, "but stupid people kill people all the time. Like the other guy [McDowell], he had the heart and drive to do it. And last time I checked, dead is dead."

PLANNING TO SET OFF "THE BOOGALOO"
Scott's work led to the arrests of Luke Lane, Jacob Kaderli, and Michael Helterbrand (from left). All three were members of the Base, a white-supremacist network determined to set off a race war in America.

Scott couldn't have known it at the time, of course, but he was feeling the first tremors underfoot: a wave of white terror that built in 2017 and has been breaking on our beaches ever since. There were horrific hate-based murders in New York and Portland, Oregon, that spring. Then, come summer, the deluge: Charlottesville, Virginia. For two days, men with long guns paraded Nazi flags through the streets of that quaint town. Cops and troopers stood by, watching, as dozens were injured in a festival of hate and horror. But even the footage of James Fields Jr. plowing his Dodge into a crowd, then backing up and hitting even more pedestrians after killing Heather Heyer, didn't center domestic terror as a frontline threat. "That whole time, I had to fight like hell to keep my Aryan Nation op alive," says Scott. "The International Terror Section were the big dogs. We in DTOS weren't deemed as important."

He and his fellow agents were flummoxed. There were groups at that rally plotting mass destruction, the worst of them the Atomwaffen Division. A global gang of white boys in their teens and early twenties, they'd been baptized in fire by the teachings of James Mason, whose banned book, *Siege*, is a syllabus for racists. Mason, a graying neo-Nazi living quietly in northern Colorado, has been grooming sociopaths since the early Eighties. He's one of the founding fathers of the "accelerationist" movement: a ragtag consortium of far-right ragers who think society's on the brink of full collapse. The job of accelerationists is to speed the plow, springing attacks on people and institutions that set the stage for race war in the streets. In that banquet of blood – the "boogaloo," as they call it – the ones with the biggest guns will prevail. Then, the terrorists can claim their caliphate: a bone-white ethnostate, armed to the teeth, that is by, for, and about the master race.

But Mason's goons in Atomwaffen were fuzzy about their targets. One of them, Nicholas Giampa, killed his girlfriend's parents because they didn't want her dating a white supremacist. Another, Devon Arthurs, killed his two roommates, both Atomwaffen boys. A third member, Samuel Woodward, stabbed his date to death after a gay hookup in California.

Those slayings were the stumbles of a lethal bunch. Three members – all Marines in a cell at Jacksonville's Camp Lejeune – were planning to take out power plants with homemade thermite bombs. They'd already formed a "death squad" and were selling no-trace rifles to conspirators around the state. A member in Las Vegas targeted a local temple; he aimed to detonate an IED, then pick off panicked congregants as they fled. These kids were such bloodcurdling posters on Gab that the feds finally acted in 2018. They sent Scott west, as part of an undercover squad, to the Destroying Texas Fest that summer. Black-metal bands with names like Satanic Goat Ritual were playing at a club in Houston; several Atomwaffen members would be there. One of the plans was for Scott, et al., to stage a "cold bump": One of them would pick a fight with the leader, John Cameron Denton, then Scott would jump in to "save" him. As it turned out, they didn't have to fake the brawl. Other agents infiltrated Denton's cell and arrested him and five others for plots against reporters, Blacks, and Jews. That freed Scott for his biggest case: the seven-month op to smash the Base.

If you're a top producer for the FBI, your career can take one of two paths. Some time in your thirties, you're encouraged to climb the ladder by applying for the position of SSA (supervisory special agent). There's a big bump in salary, you may get home in time for dinner, and it's a straight shot up to the boss's job. Alas, the great undercovers shun that route, disdainful as they are of careerist cops. "Guys like us don't think of climbing the ladder; we crave this shit too much to want to stop," says McAlpin, the retired UCE. Instead, stars like Scott often stay in their lane and build their brand by becoming master teachers. By the time he switched over to Domestic Terror in 2015, Scott was the tactical instructor of his division, and ran its firearms-qualification courses. He was also a tough-love mentor at the Undercover School, a two-week crucible of stress and sleep loss that breaks some of the candidates who enroll. "It's a horrific experience because it has to be; we're preparing you for the worst of the worst," says Terry Rankhorn, an undercover coordinator and master instructor who retired in 2019. "You'll have guns at your head, a rope around your neck; we've never killed anyone, but we've air-lifted students to hospitals."

FLOYD COUNTY POLICE/AP IMAGES, 3

TAKING DOWN THE BASE
For his last mission, Scott spent seven months as a member of a neo-Nazi outfit known as the Base. The men decried the "Zionist Occupied Government," trained in the woods with military equipment, and were planning mass murder.

Scott was in Phoenix to train online coverts when he ran into a compadre from Ohio. He and "Jim," a veteran cop assigned to Joint Terror, were the Hans and Franz twins of undercover: two hyper-muscled men with full-dress Harleys and enough tats to start a biker gang. Each of them had heard the buzz about the Base and wanted to get a case going fast. So one night, they bought a fifth of their favorite poison and stayed up building Scott an alias. Using fascist pen names, they made his social media a fount of Holocaust slurs. But try as they might, it proved problematic to get booted off Facebook, or "Jewbook," as young racists like to call it. A screenshot of your ouster is a very useful chip if you're seeking instant cred with terror groups.

So Scott took it on himself to just tag the Base directly. He wrote to the web address they posted on Gab, going by WhiteWarrior88. That night, they emailed him a questionnaire. Several days of back-and-forth led to a voice chat with some of the members, including a man calling himself Roman Wolf. Scott was asked about his combat skills and what he was willing to risk for his beliefs. Accelerationists love to boast that they're leaderless cells, and that their crypto skills shield them from being breached. But it had taken Scott a day to reach the Base online, and a week to speak to their leader directly.

Said leader, Roman Wolf – real name: Rinaldo Nazzaro – was no blood-and-soil warlord whose hateful worldview stemmed from combat horrors. Wolf graduated prep school in New Jersey and dropped out of Villanova, where he presented himself as an anarchist opposed to government meddling. He had nothing in common with the Base kids he exhorted to "finish" what Hitler started. Those boys were dirt-floor loners in the rural South, while Wolf and his wife lived comfortably in Russia after leaving America in 2018. Everything about him sounded gassy and self-inflated, from his credentials as a mercenary in the Middle East theater to his counterterror chops at an intel firm. There is evidence that he worked for the Department of Homeland Security from 2004 to 2006, but he didn't learn much tradecraft on the job. The firewall he built around his white-terror op has been breached, time and again, by media types. He bought land, for instance, in Washington state to stage hate camps for the Base, but the site was doxxed by a Vice reporter and swarmed by antifa types. The kids in his western cell quickly quit the group, and Wolf had to start all over in the East.

The day after his interview, Scott was asked to join the Base. Wolf put him in touch with the nearest cell leader – a guy in Rome, Georgia, named Luke Lane. "I didn't know it then, but he was the bastard we'd been hunting under his call name, TMB [The Militant Buddhist]," says Scott. "Outta all of 'em in the cell, Lane was the most gonzo. He'd be up till dawn posting seriously crazy shit." A week or two later, Scott drove to meet Lane near a statue of a – yes, lord – Roman wolf. Lane, 20, and Pestilence, 19, approached Scott in the standard issue of young fascists: black BDUs bloused into combat boots. Lane told Scott to put his cell on airplane mode, then wanded him with a contraption he'd never seen. "It was this detector that picks up waves from any recording device – and my team had put a tracker on my truck," says Scott.

Two thoughts went through him in a blur: *This'll be the shortest undercover in history* (it wasn't – he'd parked under a power line, fuzzing the rod's reception), and *How are these kids buying equipment the FBI doesn't have?* That question, or something like it, came up again all weekend as he scoped out the armory they'd amassed. Each member of the Base who came to Lane's place had a kit he could hit the ground with in Tikrit. Set aside their long guns with which they aired out Star of David targets. What stunned Scott was all their ancillary gear: bulletproof vests with ceramic plates that could stop an AK round, and loaded battle-rattles holding gas masks and mag clips and everything you'd need in a firefight. "These boys were tight," says Scott in grudging awe. "Their shoot-and-move skills, their magazine dumps – for home-schooled dudes, they were pretty squared away."

Scott says Lane lived on a farm that wasn't fit for habitation. There was a house on the property encircled by trash, but that was somehow rented to a tenant. Lane and his father bunked in the loft of their converted barn, where they shared a kitchen and bathroom with Lane's sister. The father worked construction and was gone all day, but neither his son nor Lane's best friend had a job. Pestilence – real name: Jacob Kaderli – was an unemployed teen who somehow scrounged the cash to pay for combat gear. Helter-Skelter – real name: Michael Helterbrand – was the only Georgia member with a steady check. He worked in IT. Lane was the oddest of the three, though, says Scott: an eighth-grade dropout who'd quit school to read *Mein Kampf* and trade firearms online all night. Scott never saw his bedroom, but heard from the other members that it harbored an arsenal. "That's how he had money to buy new gear," says Scott. "Buying and selling on armslist.com."

At night, after hours of training maneuvers and honing their Sieg Heil poses, the Base boys would sit beneath an awning by the barn, drinking Jägermeister and trading tin-foil theories. "Pestilence would be talking about the Earth being concave, that Hit-

ler proved it by firing rockets that came down," says Scott. "Then someone would say, 'No, bullshit. Hitler's living in Middle Earth, along with a race of giants.' " And Lane would declaim against the "ZOG," or the Zionist Occupied Government [of America]. For all their pagan bluster and dreams of an ethnostate, Scott couldn't help but ask these sex-starved boys how they planned to sire the master race. "Oh, that's easy," said one of them. "We'll just kidnap bitches and rape 'em till they give us kids."

There was a lot of this sort of thing over the next three months. Scott (rechristened PaleHorse) drove to Georgia twice a month and met his support team at their off-site. Installed in a defunct schoolhouse, the feds wired him up to record for two days straight. (They also flew a plane overhead that filmed the group's movements from four miles up.) For 48 hours, his backups eavesdropped as the Base boys burned Bibles and U.S. flags, cut themselves to bleed on blocks of Norse runes, and raged against Jesus and "the rest of his fucking Jews." What the feds didn't hear were the names and dates of targets; the Georgia cell took pains to speak vaguely. Scott sensed they were hatching something, but couldn't get them to say it. Meanwhile, his case kept getting bigger.

Sometime in August, three other men showed up; one became a fixture at the farm. He had a fringy beard and was evasive about his background, but his Manitoba twang gave him away. Patrik Mathews was a corporal in the Canadian Reserves trained in explosives who'd fled Canada after being outed as a neo-Nazi by a reporter. Half the FBI was looking for Mathews, who'd snuck across the border weeks before. Members of the Georgia cell were awed by his prowess and his commitment to the cause. Lane's father let him stay at the farm, where, per Scott, Mathews slept in a horse stall for two months.

Then there were the other two who'd come down with him. Can't-Go-Back – real name: Brian Lemley – was an Army vet and truck driver who'd scooped up Mathews near the border and harbored him for a while in Virginia. Eisen – real name: William Bilbrough – was another middle-earther and self-taught ninja whose martial skills weren't worth a damn. Those three wanted to start a race war ASAP. Mathews, who'd named himself PunishSnake, had the self-assurance of the psychotic. He was, he said, "invisible," the perfect killing machine because, as far as anyone knew, he was dead. Drunk or sober, he'd foam at the mouth about downed power lines and poisoned water supplies. That fall, when they formed their own cell in Delaware, Mathews and Lemley built a ghost gun from parts, hatched plans to assassinate cops for their weapons, and roughed out a plot on a gun rally on the Capitol steps in Virginia.

Meanwhile, Scott was under blue-flame pressure to bust the Georgia cell. It is murderously expensive to build a multistate op on a terror group that keeps growing. By October, the feds had dozens of members in their sights, and offices from New York to L.A. were opening cases against suspects in their region. Scott would man the phones once a week at 10 a.m., briefing the other teams about his progress. Sometimes, he says, "there were a hundred people on the line – and a whole bunch of backstabbing" going down. Alliances and antipathies formed between regions: "Some of us divisions were on the same sheet of music, saying 'Where's the imminent threat? Just play this out.' Whereas other teams were like, 'These guys are unstable! People are gonna die if we don't move.'"

Well, of course, they're unstable, Scott thought but didn't say. *That's what I'm counting on.*

IT IS, TO CORRUPT TOLSTOY, a truth self-evident: Every unhappy family is alike. The Base, a paranoid clan with no shared past or people skills, was rigged to explode before it fired the first shot or laid its first bomb outside a church. Scott says Lane, who'd idolized Mathews in August, was plotting to blow his brains out that fall. He'd had it with Mathews' "fed talk" – the loosey-goosey mentions of murder and mayhem that draw the eyes and ears of the FBI. Also – and this was a problem – Mathews "knew too much," mostly because Lane had spilled his plans to him.

That Halloween weekend, Lane and Pestilence shared those plans with Scott. Sitting around a campfire after everyone else had left, they told him to put his phone on ice. "We've developed targets" we're going after, said Pestilence. Lane didn't divulge names, but wanted to know if Scott was up for whatever. "Brothers, you know this," said Scott. "Just tell me when and where – and give me a couple days to clear the decks."

Just before Thanksgiving, Scott got a blast on Wire, via a channel used only by the cell. Be back here in mid-December, said Lane, and bring your whole kit "for a family-friendly camping trip." Scott drove down there on the appointed day, making sure to arrive before the others. "Whattaya got?" he asked Lane, just the two of them by the barn. We're gonna go whack some people, Lane whispered: an antifa couple living an hour away. "Well, dang," said Scott, trying to stall for time. "That ain't nothin' I want to drive my personal truck to." He peppered Lane with questions: Who lives in the house with them? Are there children and pets present? How close is their bedroom to the neighbors?

Lane admitted he knew none of those things; he agreed to delay the hit to do recon. "Forget it," said Scott. "I'll get the intel myself." His cover job – site surveying – gave him credentials to pull deeds and housing floor plans. He slow-walked that "research" and took a stealth trip up North, training with Mathews and Lemley in Delaware. The two cells had come to truly loathe each other, and Scott worked the rift on both ends. "I don't like the way Lane treats you guys," he said. "We're supposed to be on the same side." Mathews entreated him to join their cell, then let him in on the plot.

"THESE GUYS ARE UNSTABLE! PEOPLE WILL DIE IF WE DON'T MOVE," SAID A FED. WELL, OF COURSE, THEY'RE UNSTABLE, SCOTT THOUGHT. THAT'S WHAT I'M COUNTING ON.

Sitting in their flat in Newark, Delaware, Scott sipped his whiskey and nodded as they sketched it out. There was a Second Amendment rally in Virginia, they said, that figured to be a powder keg. Democrats had just taken power in the state and were planning stiff gun-control measures. While tens of thousands of people milled the Capitol steps, they'd set up in a tree line a hundred yards back and start picking off cops and troopers. A circular firing squad would spark off: Cops would shoot the gun nuts, gun nuts would shoot antifa, and bystanders would be cut down in the middle. As Scott winked at a wall cam that the feds installed while the two men were off at work, Mathews rambled on about his plans. After the rally, they'd slip away and become a roving death squad, posing as homeless men to stalk their targets. At night, gloved and hooded, they'd follow a reporter to his car, put a couple rounds in the back of his head, then move to the next city and lefty target.

Scott had gotten enough to bag the Delaware cell. But he needed a little luck now to take down the Georgia crew. It doesn't suffice to tape people talking murder – they actually have to do something to further that plot in order for charges to stick. It was January 2020, and the window was closing fast. If Scott didn't act before the rally in nine days, the Georgia cell would scatter once Mathews fell.

On Jan. 12, Scott drove back to Rome: Lane announced that the hit was going down. Scott's pulse raced when he heard what they'd acquired. They had bought catch bags for their brass – sacks that clip to the ejection ports of rifles and catch the expended shells as they pour out. They had drilled a silencer for a pistol, and would go out and buy frog tape to cinch their pant-legs so they didn't leave stray skin cells at the scene. (They also said they'd grab a package of adult diapers, having heard that people shit themselves doing their first murder.) Scott, for his part, produced some images of the house, but couldn't get the list of current tenants. "Well, whatever," said Helter-Skelter. "If there's kids there, let's whack 'em. I got no problem killing commie kids."

The original plan was for Helter to drive and the other three to go in blazing. But Helter had changed his mind: He wanted "to pop his cherry" instead of waiting in the truck. Otherwise, the blueprint remained the same. They'd rent a single room at a dive motel; there, they'd shower up, slough their dead skin off, and change into disposable murder gear. Scott would steal a truck with out-of-state plates, and someone would bring accelerants to torch the house. They'd be in and out in minutes, murder everything that moved, and leave behind a fireball for the cops.

On Jan. 15, Scott called on Lane to take him out to lunch. Driving out of the farm, he turned off the dirt road when he heard an odd noise from his pickup. "Fuck!" he said to Lane as he pulled over. "If this truck's messin' up on me again . . ."

He got out and walked to the back of the truck when another pickup passed him on the road. The driver stopped and asked Scott if he needed help. While they talked, an armored BearCat came over the hill, a gunner in the turret with an M-4. Scott and the other driver dove into the truck and tore off. A SWAT team surrounded Lane, guns drawn.

A couple of hours later, a team arrested Pestilence at his house two hours south, near Atlanta. His parents feigned innocence about their son's intentions, but Scott claims otherwise. "Pest said he would show his dad videos of our training sessions; hell, he said his dad used to take him to the gun range."

At five that afternoon, cops arrested Helter-Skelter as he left his IT job in Georgia. The three cell members were held without bail and booked for a raft of crimes: conspiracy to commit murder, arson, home invasion, and – eventually – animal cruelty to that goat. The next day, Jan. 16, SWAT teams in two cities rolled up Mathews, Lemley, and Bilbrough. BigSiege – real name: Yousef Barasneh – was busted with a second member for defacing houses of worship. Lanzer – real name: Richard Tobin – was charged with conspiracy in those crimes: He was the one who'd planned a nationwide assault on churches and temples. Months later, cops got ZoomGnat – real name: Duncan Trimmell – the deranged kid who'd driven all the way from Texas to take part in the Halloween gore. So, too, Dima – real name: Brandon Ashley; both were charged for beheading a goat.

In all, the bureau snared 11 members, effectively ending the group. So strong was the proof Scott gathered against them that they all took pleas and prison bids. Not so Nazzaro, the leader of the Base, who denies any part in their plots. At this writing, he sits, impregnable, at his redoubt in Russia, far beyond the reach of law enforcement. There, he recruits his next band of racists, protected by the U.S. Constitution. Still an American citizen, he has the First Amendment right to polemicize the slaughter of civilians. Does he crave the fall of government and the erasure of Blacks and Jews, or are those just the tantrums of a middle-age troll from the dark side of the moon? For all anyone knows, he's an FSB proxy who cares only about planting false flags.

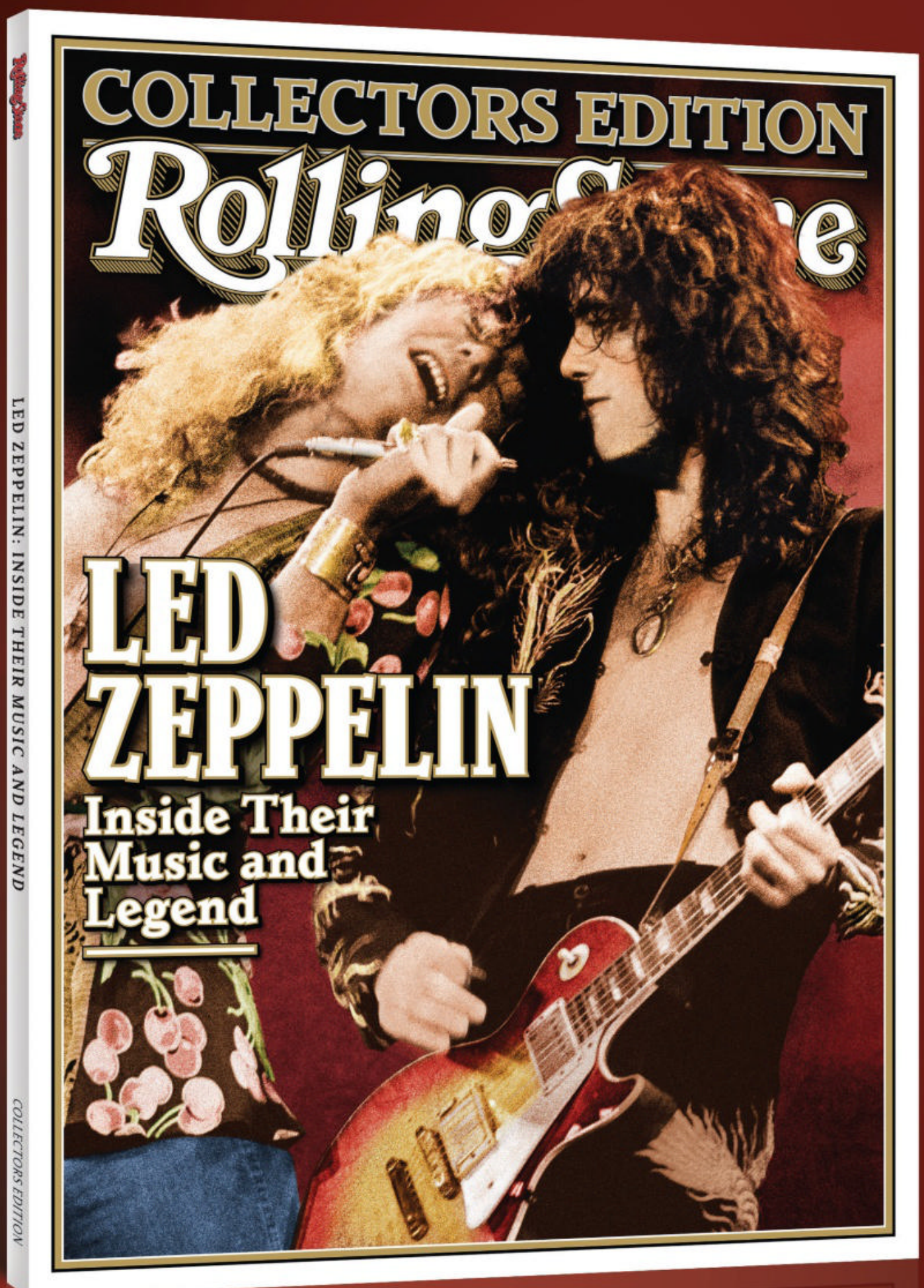
While on the subject of false flags: That antifa couple in Georgia? They were neither antifa nor a couple. Far from living together, they were total strangers who were photographed side by side at a rally. But that is what happens when you recruit child soldiers who can't read a caption below a picture. You seed the soil for war in which everyone's a foe, and the killers we fear the most are our own kids.

THEY THREW A DAY for Scott in his hometown when he retired; it was quite the swell affair of state. The mayor and lieutenant governor read proclamations of honor, the Domestic Terror brass flew in from D.C., and one of their senior analysts gave a toast to his heroics. "No one in this room," she said, "has any idea how many lives this man saved these last five years." She congratulated Scott on his retirement and presented him a quart of aged bourbon. On the back of the bottle was a ghost engraving: the original G-man in a fedora, toting a tommy gun.

There were a hundred people gathered there to cheer on Scott; naturally, he rocked his own party. He played them "Purple Rain" and "Pride and Joy," bending notes until they begged for help. And then he did his version of "The Devil Named Music," because that song caught the blues of the undercover: Yes, I get tired of being alone/I miss my daughter/I miss my wife/But the devil named music is taking my life. For most of three decades, he'd hardly ever been home, spending months on the road as a character with a rap sheet and a convincing cover story. "You can't play with the devil without the devil bleeding into you – and your family feels it way before you do," says Dave Redemann, an undercover instructor with 30 years' experience who trained Scott at UC school. "There's a guilt he has for not seeing his kids grow up, and he's one of the very few who's honest with young agents about the cost he's paid for doing this." Scott mourns the missed birthdays and the marital dust-ups, the calls from his sobbing wife "while I was halfway across the country, way overcommitted on a case." He's had spinal fusions on a back that broke twice; surgical reattachments of his biceps, knee, and shoulders; and a complete collapse in 2007, "burning the candle till it ran out of wax," he says. He'd been emptying the ocean of hate with a spoon, he says. "The shit I saw, I'm never gonna unsee."

And so, because he had to, Scott walked away cold. Closed his laptop, tossed his work phones, and logged off all the platforms: a funeral, of sorts, for his false selves. There's only so much evil you can will yourself to swallow before it turns to poison in your throat. When the back-taste overwhelms him, he gets on his blacked-out Harley and rides a twisty pass through the Appalachians. There's a river up there where he sits and eyes the current, listening to the tree frogs and cicadas. They sing to him, a tune he can't make out but which takes him somewhere better down the bend.

Photograph by **Mike Belleme**



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Music

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SPOON

A consistently excellent Texas indie-rock band takes it to a whole new level

By JON DOLAN

Spoon
Lucifer on the Sofa
MATADOR
★★★★½

SPOON ARE the most reliable great American rock band of the past 25 years. That might say more about American rock than it does about Spoon, but facts don't lie. They've been at it since the mid-Nineties, and they've never made a dull record, thanks to leader Britt Daniel's brilliant songwriting and a knack for nuancing their Texas indie rock. They do jittery guitar bangers; they throw in some soul; they try out electronics; they nod to Prince and the Kinks and Motown and Wire. But it always comes out sounding like Spoon: casually stylish and stunningly catchy, opaque but openhearted, bristling with the thrill of subtle invention.

In fact, over the years Spoon have been so →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Sonia Kretschmar

SPOON

consistent you can almost take them for granted. Which is why their 10th album, *Lucifer on the Sofa,* is so welcome. It's the best thing they've ever done, more than exceeding their usual quotient of fire guitars, killer choruses, and crafty rock-history updates. Whether it's the barbed-glam stomp of "The Hardest Cut," the sidelong Seventies sleaze of "The Devil & Mister Jones" and "Lucifer on the Sofa," or the rarefied roadhouse grit of "Held," Spoon have never cranked up their Spooniness so Spoonfully.

There's definitely a post-pandemic urgency here; after a couple of albums that leaned into studio digitalia, 2014's *They Want My Soul* and 2017's *Hot Thoughts,* this one feels like a return to the coiled, trenchant band-in-a-room brio of LPs like their 2002 classic, *Kill the Moonlight*. "Sing my heart out, beat my chest," Daniel sings on "My Babe."

Proudly basic titles like "Wild," "Feels Alright," and "My Babe" sum up the thrill of getting back to old-fashioned rock & roll kicks. With "Wild," Daniel lets loose a ferocious Neil Diamond homage, like he's heroically sweating out a hot August night of the soul. He says he spent a lot of time during quarantine listening to his Tejas homies ZZ Top, and you can hear that in the way the tense, torrid guitars lash into notoriously locked-in drummer Jim Eno's hypnotic conclusion on pretty much every song. For a little languid beauty, there's the Ray Davies whimsy of "Astral Jacket."

They've even got a song called "On the Radio," which sounds like what it suggests: a Nineties indie-rock guy channeling his memories of David Bowie and ELO into an ode to salvation by the FM dial. It's a pretty absurd sentiment these days – kind of like the Little River Band singing about dancing to Glenn Miller on "Reminiscing" in 1978. But Daniel delivers his dashboard gospel with the spiritual intensity of a Pentecostal holy roller.

Lucifer on the Sofa is that kind of record, the sound of ancient dreams born again. ®

Quick Hits

Ten new albums you need to know about now

Mitski
Laurel Hell
Dead Oceans

HOLY HELL The follow-up to her 2018 breakthrough, *Be the Cowboy*, is a dark-tinged Eighties dance triumph, from the Pat Benatar pop of "Love Me More" to the disco-circus strut of "That's Our Lamp."

★★★★☆

Silvana Estrada
Marchita
Glassnote

PURE BEAUTY This Mexican artist's debut is gorgeously understated, guided by her gauzy voice and rich, acoustic arrangements. Tapping into the vastness of Mexican music, she thrills in simplicity.

★★★★☆

Cate Le Bon
Pompeii
Mexican Summer

GREAT CATE With her stentorian yet weirdly lovely voice and ability to make off-kilter art pop seem inviting, Le Bon is one of indie music's more beguilingly brilliant artists, as her sixth LP attests.

★★★★☆

Roddy Ricch
Live Life Fast
Atlantic

FAST FUN The hip-hop superstar's voice is an amazing thing to behold, a mass of controlled squeaks and melodic outbursts. His celebratory sophomore album isn't deep, but he's clearly having a great time.

★★★½☆

Big Thief
Dragon New Warm Mountain I Believe in You
4AD

BIGGER THIEF They're the best indie-folk band around, thanks to Adrianne Lenker's sharp, introspective songwriting. Their latest stretches out for 20 songs, from hard-bitten to dreamy, dire to rapturous.

★★★½☆

Rick Ross
Richer Than I've Ever Been
Epic

YACHT RAP It's all smooth sailing on the Miami rapper's latest. Ross' drug-kingpin fantasies are as lush as his cinematic tracks, and his highfalutin aspirations are still a major part of his authenticity.

★★★½☆

Brent Cobb
And Now, Let's Turn to Page...
Ol' Buddy

NEW-TIME RELIGION Georgia boy Cobb makes gospel music fun, funky, and oh-so-cool on this collection of traditional hymns — plus, the original "When It's My Time," a smoldering ode to mortality.

★★★½☆

St. Paul and the Broken Bones
The Alien Coast
ATO

ANOTHER ROUND Birmingham, Alabama, soul shouter Paul Janeway leads his crew through a prickly selection of psychedelic R&B and proto-funk. When they're on, the BBs are one of the finest bar bands around.

★★★☆☆

Animal Collective
Time Skiffs
Domino

FAMILIAR TRIP Animal Collective made hipsterland safe for gamelan jams and other neo-psych spaciness. A decade down the road from their finest work, they can still take you higher.

★★★☆☆

Korn
Requiem
Loma Vista

KINDA KORNY "Let the Dark Do the Rest" is the nu-metal lifers' poppiest rocker in years. But when Jonathan Davis sings "I know this all sounds so cliché," on "Lost in the Grandeur," he's pretty much right.

★★½☆☆

CONTRIBUTORS: JONATHAN BERNSTEIN, JON DOLAN, WILL DUKES, KORY GROW, JOSEPH HUDAK, JULYSSA LOPEZ

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: JEFF HAHNE/GETTY IMAGES; EBRU YILDIZ; RICK KERN/GETTY IMAGES; PRINCE WILLIAMS/GETTY IMAGES; TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor RATINGS ARE SUPERVISED BY THE EDITORS OF ROLLING STONE.

Rolling Stone GUIDE

Tyler, the Creator

The avant-garde L.A. troublemaker who became one of hip-hop's essential innovators

By WILL DUKES

Must-Haves

Call Me If You Get Lost

2021

Tyler, the Creator's sixth studio album is the one where he made all the moving parts in his bifurcated brain flow into a seamless stream of sure-shot bangers. With mixtape icon DJ Drama as host, he samples obscure Seventies jazz, evokes classic R&B, and features Pharrell as well as hard-nosed Detroit MC 42 Dugg, arriving at a fully realized work as inviting as it is head-spinning.

Further Listening

Goblin

2013

This is where it all started. Only skate rats were up on Odd Future before Tyler, the Creator, and Hodgy Beats blitzkrieged *Late Night With Jimmy Fallon* with their frenetic collab "Sandwitches." *Goblin* is rough around the edges — somewhere between low-fi mixtape and ready-for-prime-time debut. But Tyler gave zero fucks. He had a lot to prove, and mostly lived up to the hype.

Flower Boy

2017

A decade into their run, the juvenile gags and contrarianism that defined Odd Future were getting stale, and it was clear Tyler had a broader vision to offer. *Flower Boy* provided some much-needed maturity. "Boredom," with its sublime orchestral flourishes, makes an enchanted wonderland out of ennui. "November" finds him talking about doing taxes, for Chrissakes. Safe to say the boy had flowered into a man.

SACHA LECCA

Igor

2019

Though its cover has him looking like some pop-art Polaroid of Max Headroom, there's nothing artificial about Tyler's breakup opus. The nostalgic vibe is heavy on cuts like "Earfquake," and "I Think," on which the synths give off big acid-washed energy. And rejection never sounded sweeter than on "Running Out of Time."

Going Deeper

Wolf

2013

Wolf is an uncompromising crowd-pleaser, and easily Tyler's most underrated album. Besties Earl Sweatshirt and Domo Genesis lay waste to the exotic Rhodes-suffused thud of "Rusty." There's enough off-color punchlines ("Colossus") and offhanded angst to make *Wolf* the excellent logical progression from those early Odd Future tapes.

Cherry Bomb

2015

No one was quite sure where Tyler was going with his third album. Odd Future had broken up, and its leader seemed to be taking a throw-shit-at-the-wall approach. That said, there's a lot to love here — from the chakra-healing soul of "Find Your Wings" (which feels like a time capsule from some Black righteous spacemen) to the mosh-ready "Death Camp."

More Creation

Half a dozen loose gems from the Tyler canon

"PIGIONS"

Earl Sweatshirt, 2010
Earl Sweatshirt is the most gifted of Tyler's Odd Future peers — precocious, literary, rebellious. But here, he pales next to Tyler, who takes over the jazzy track like he's some Dickensian villain.

"ORANGE JUICE"

Odd Future, 2010
Tyler's clownish growl aligns spectacularly with Earl Sweatshirt's labyrinthian verbal gymnastics to make this clever mixtape flip of Gucci Mane's "Lemonade" an essential cut.

"OLDIE"

Odd Future, 2012
Tyler turned this full-on posse cut — like the Native Tongues on Adderall — into a platform for his scene-stealing, mischievous one-liners, asserting that he's "flyer than an ostrich moshing in a tar pit."

"TELEPHONE CALLS"

A$AP Mob (feat. A$AP Rocky, Playboi Carti, Tyler, the Creator, and Young Gleesh), 2016
Early friction between Harlem crew A$AP Mob and Odd Future's originator evolves into a bromance on this manic meeting of the minds; Tyler runs laps around the caustic beat, bragging that the "ambulance come when I hit the scene."

"SOMETHING TO RAP ABOUT"

Freddie Gibbs and the Alchemist (feat. Tyler, the Creator), 2020
Tyler practically floats on this track, leavening Freddie Gibbs' formidable dope talk with upbeat couplets that flow by like a TED Talk on gratitude.

"THE FLY WHO COULDN'T FLY STRAIGHT"

Westside Gunn (feat. Tyler, the Creator), 2021
This hazy boom-bap affair proves Tyler has more than enough ammunition to shoot it out with the best of 'em, as he raps, "Think you that big stepper, fuck around, get your ankles tied."

James channels her blondest bombshell as Anderson.

T.V.

THE SEX TAPE THAT STARTED IT ALL

Hulu's humanizing and hilarious 'Pam & Tommy' exposes a pivotal moment in porn and pop culture

Pam & Tommy

NETWORK	Hulu
AIR DATE	Feb. 2
STARRING	Lily James Sebastian Stan Seth Rogen Nick Offerman Taylor Schilling Fred Hechinger

★★★★☆

ALAN SEPINWALL

WHILE WATCHING the stolen sex tape featuring *Baywatch* star Pamela Anderson and Mötley Crüe drummer Tommy Lee, Uncle Miltie (Nick Offerman) says, "This is so private. It's like we're seeing something we're not supposed to be seeing." A beat later, he admits, "Which is kind of what makes it so fucking hot."

That push and pull between embarrassment and lust drives much of *Pam & Tommy,* a whip-smart, funny, and ultimately poignant reexamination of an event that once seemed like an easy punchline for tabloids and Jay Leno monologues. The eight-part miniseries humanizes Anderson (played by Lily James) and Lee (Sebastian Stan), acknowledges all the ways the theft of their sex tape transformed celebrity and media culture, and still manages to be absurd and at times hilarious in a way that will leave you gasping for breath. (It's everything Ryan Murphy tried and failed to do with docudramas like *Halston* and *Impeachment*.)

Pam & Tommy starts in the summer of 1995, with carpenter Rand Gauthier working on the newlyweds' new master bedroom. In its opening moments, he's distracted from his work by their constant, extremely loud lovemaking, and begins firing his nail gun in rhythm with their moans. The gag is not subtle, but then, neither were international sex symbol Anderson and metal bad boy Lee. The first hour largely focuses on Gauthier – a dreamer whose would-be inventions ("Imagine a microwave, but for cold!") never materialize – as he's abused and ultimately stiffed by Lee for his work, inspiring him to rob the couple's safe for revenge. (The details of the theft briefly turn this into a heist movie.) It's a clever way into the story, playing into our preconceptions of Anderson and Lee as oversexed cartoons in need of comeuppance, and initially framing Gauthier as the sympathetic injured party (Rogen's terrific, and surprisingly convincing as a blue-collar grunt) who just gave people what they wanted.

This is just setting up the audience for the way *Pam & Tommy* ultimately takes the side of its title characters (her more than him), played fantastically by James and Stan. In real life, James looks nothing like Anderson, yet the hair-and-makeup team somehow transform her into a dead ringer. The show also endows her and Stan with convincing re-creations of Anderson's and Lee's most famous physical attributes. (The latter is the subject of an utterly bonkers scene that we would not dream of spoiling, but that the rest of the year in television will have to work long and hard to equal, let alone rise above.)

But James' and Stan's performances go much deeper than their newfound resemblances to Anderson and Lee. They're not playing the caricatures we thought we knew. James' Anderson is particularly winning. She's keenly aware of what the world expects of her, and of the wild benefits and intense drawbacks of her iconic physique. Often, she comes across as the small-town British Columbia girl she was before she became heroic lifeguard C.J. Parker, and she's smart enough to know that Lee will not be healthy for her, even as she can't resist his outsize charisma. And the magic of the thing is that Stan makes Lee seem genuinely charming – a dim, volatile asshole to the rest of the world, but someone whose appeal to Anderson makes immediate, perfect sense. Near the end of a whirlwind courtship in Cancún, he asks her, "Would you do me the insane honor of being my wife?" And how could she possibly say no to such a question? We all know the bad times ahead for them as a couple, including incidents of domestic abuse by Lee, but none of this version of the story works if their initial flush of love doesn't feel real. After Gauthier and porn veteran Miltie (Offerman embraces the sleaze of it all) begin selling copies of the tape, Gauthier's ex-wife, Erica (Taylor Schilling), watches it and

James and Stan face the paps.

ERIN SIMKIN/HULU, 2

says, "I kinda like them. I know he's a fucking idiot and everything, and he is, but he's strangely kind of likable."

The narrative runs on parallel tracks. In one, Gauthier and Miltie figure out how to distribute copies of the stolen tape, until the operation (financed by a loan shark played by Andrew Dice Clay) slips out of their control. In the other, Anderson and Lee discover that the most intimate part of their relationship has become terribly public, and that they have no way to stop it. Together, the two stories point the way toward the next quarter-century of popular culture. The sex tape ruined Anderson's career (well, that and her disastrous movie-star vehicle *Barb Wire,* about which *Pam & Tommy* pulls no punches), but only six years later, the release of a similar one started Kim Kardashian down the path to becoming a billionaire influencer. Coupled with the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, the tape transformed how we talk about sex, making taboo topics into normal parts of public discourse. It was one of the first products to sell like hotcakes through the internet, and once a digital copy of it was uploaded to an early webcam site, it helped bring the idea of internet porn into the mainstream.

Before all of this happens, Pamela tells a publicist for *Barb Wire* that she aspires to be like Jane Fonda, a sex symbol who then became an Oscar-winning actor and antiwar activist who never cared what people thought of her. Fonda also became associated with bestselling videotapes, but in the case of her workouts, it was voluntary. *Pam & Tommy* repeatedly acknowledges the unfair toll the sale of the tape took on Anderson's life, even as it's wildly entertaining most of the time. Pamela Anderson never got to have a Jane Fonda-esque second act, and maybe couldn't have even if Rand Gauthier had never entered her husband's life. But here, she at least gets her story retold in a far kinder and more endearing way. ®

PAMELA'S ONSCREEN OEUVRE

Give Anderson credit where it's due: Several of her roles are iconic — for better *or* worse.

Home Improvement
1991-93
As the "Tool Time Girl" for the sitcom's first two seasons, she wielded drills and punchlines with skill.

Baywatch
1992-97
The most popular star when *Baywatch* was the world's most popular show.

Barb Wire
1996
The comic-book stinker rips off *Casablanca* — and casts Anderson as Bogie?

V.I.P.
1998-2002
Anderson played a bodyguard to the stars in this syndicated action-comedy.

Borat
2006
A smitten Borat tries abducting Anderson — gamely playing herself, naturally — in the climax of his riotous film debut.

Scott plays a desk jockey.

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

Severance
NETWORK: Apple TV+
AIR DATE: Feb. 18
STARRING: Adam Scott, Patricia Arquette, John Turturro
★★★★☆

IN THIS Ben Stiller-directed series created by Dan Erickson, Adam Scott plays Mark, a corporate cubicle drone who's undergone a "severance" procedure to separate his memory of his time on the job from his memory of everything else. One version of Mark (called an "innie") never gets to leave the office, while the other (his "outie") has no clue what his body does there for eight hours a day. *Severance*'s literalization of the struggle for work-life balance feels equal parts Charlie Kaufman-esque sci-fi whimsy, paranoid Seventies thriller, and end-stage capitalism satire.

It's also very, very good – especially the further you go down the rabbit hole with Mark and fellow innies Helly (Britt Lower), Irving (John Turturro), and Dylan (Zach Cherry) to discover how terrible an existence devoted solely to your bosses would be. When Helly's work self wakes up for the first time in the office, with no idea who she is or how she got there, she asks, "This isn't, like, hell or something?" Mark gently insists that it's not. But within a few episodes, Helly seems to be onto something metaphorically, and not just because older colleagues like Irving, the quirky Burt (Christopher Walken), and domineering boss Harmony (Patricia Arquette) treat the company itself as their religion.

Stiller has become an even more assured and visually inventive filmmaker than he was on 2018's *Escape From Dannemora*. Here, he captures both the strangeness of the concept and its emotional implications. His camera makes the impressively weird production design seem even more unnerving, and he gets fascinating, nuanced performances from familiar actors like Scott and Turturro, and less-heralded ones like Lower and Tramell Tillman (as the perma-smiling goon enforcing severance rules).

The story moves slowly at first, but builds across the first season's nine episodes. The finale is almost unbearably tense in a way that's far more pleasurable than anything the innies get to experience as they complete tasks they don't fully understand, in service of a world they're not allowed to visit. **A.S.**

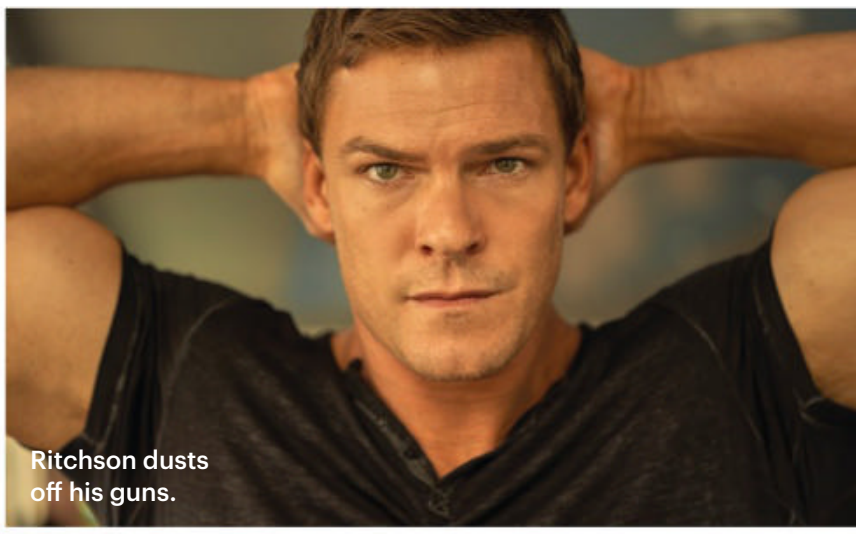
UN-INCREDIBLE HULK

Reacher
NETWORK: Amazon
AIR DATE: Feb. 4
STARRING: Alan Ritchson, Malcolm Goodwin, Willa Fitzgerald
★★☆☆☆

WITH JACK Reacher, size matters – but it also isn't everything. Starting in 1997, Lee Child authored two dozen thrillers starring Reacher, a retired Army investigator who now lives as a hobo, wandering from town to town and finding trouble along the way. He's a brilliant detective, but also a six-foot-five-inch wall of muscle who draws eyes in every room he enters, and is the favorite in the many fights he gets into.

Hilariously, pocket-size movie star Tom Cruise insisted on playing Reacher in two films that more or less captured the character's intensity and self-sufficiency. Cruise just lacked the mythical stature that most clearly distinguished Reacher from his action-movie peers and sleuthing counterparts.

Amazon's new *Reacher* series basically gets the build right. Star Alan Ritchson is tall and swole enough to look plausible casually bursting out of a pair of flex cuffs. But whenever his shirt comes off (which is often), he has the definition of a man who spends four hours a day in a gym with a personal trainer, versus a slightly evolved caveman who came by his strength through scraps and brawls. Ritchson's six-pack is a physical manifestation of a tonal problem: His Reacher is smarmy and pleased with himself, rather than casually secure in his abilities. He's a generic vigilante who just happens to look like a mountain next to the small-town Georgia cops (played by Malcolm Goodwin and Willa Fitzgerald) who assist him in this maiden adventure.



Ritchson dusts off his guns.

The show also lacks the internal monologue in which Reacher is constantly doing the math to figure out where suspects may have gone and how best to injure the five men attacking him at the moment. This Reacher occasionally explains himself to others, but never in a way that makes him live up to the "Sherlock Homeless" nickname he has in the novels. And whenever Ritchson tries to show Reacher as stoic, he instead comes off as stiff and robotic.

The season is otherwise a relatively faithful adaptation of the first Reacher novel, *The Killing Floor.* But the books live or die on Reacher himself, rather than on the sometimes gimmicky plotting or Child's fascination with torture and gore. If *he's* not interesting, none of it is. That's a big problem, no matter the leading man's size. **A.S.**

FROM TOP: ATSUSHI NISHIJIMA/APPLE TV+; ROBOTOK; KERI ANDERSON/AMAZON STUDIOS

Lemercier brings the power of love (and a silly expression) to the stage.

MY HEART WILL GO ON, AND ON…

A biopic about a superstar singer who bears a striking resemblance to Celine Dion makes us rethink a diva's love life

Aline

STARRING
Valérie Lemercier
Sylvain Marcel
Danielle Fichaud
Roc Lafortune

DIRECTED BY
Valérie Lemercier

K. AUSTIN COLLINS

LET'S TALK about love . . . and open secrets. Both are at the heart of what make writer-director-star Valérie Lemercier's *Aline* – "a fiction loosely inspired by the life of Celine Dion," the poster tells us – such an oddity compared with most musical biopics. You certainly can't tell the story of the Canadian diva without it being a love story, and not just because of the songs she sings. For those even only passingly familiar with this story, it's well-known that there was a 26-year age difference between Dion and her manager-partner, Rene Angélil (who died in 2016 of throat cancer). It's not this part that's felt so strange to discuss, but rather the murky particulars of that romance's origins: Their acquaintance began when Dion was only 12. Then she turned 18, and despite the objections of her parents, Dion and Angélil soon became an item.

If you've heard anything about this movie, it's that Lemercier plays her Dion substitute, named Aline Dieu, at all ages – from five years old to fully grown and widowed. Picture the adult Lemercier performing, as a child, at a sibling's wedding. Then picture her at 12 – the same actor, mind you – meeting her manager-to-be for the first time. Then again in her late teens, gushing over the man she loves without being able to say his name in public for fear of exactly the kind of scrutiny that this movie seems to be courting.

If the idea is to satirize the interest of the older gentleman (here renamed Guy-Claude Kamar and played by Sylvain Marcel) in *Aline,* the movie is onto something – maybe. There's a version of what plays out onscreen that could've been ripped from the mind of a man who's deluded himself into thinking Aline was always, to some degree, the goofy, fun-loving adult that Lemercier makes her out to be. If the idea is to distract from the thing we've all avoided talking about, the movie marvelously fails. This is a story front-loaded by the beginnings of what becomes a nearly lifelong romance; a tightrope is being walked.

Lemercier and Marcel are a match made in heaven.

Aline opens with a comical sense of Big Family antics. (Aline's parents have 14 children, we learn, of whom Aline is the most talented.) The tone of it all – from the family sending off a tape to Kamar to her *Pygmalion*-style refashioning into a young woman with dental work and a modicum of style – feels as if the movie is gearing up for a decisive "Oh, shit, *so we're really going to go there?*"

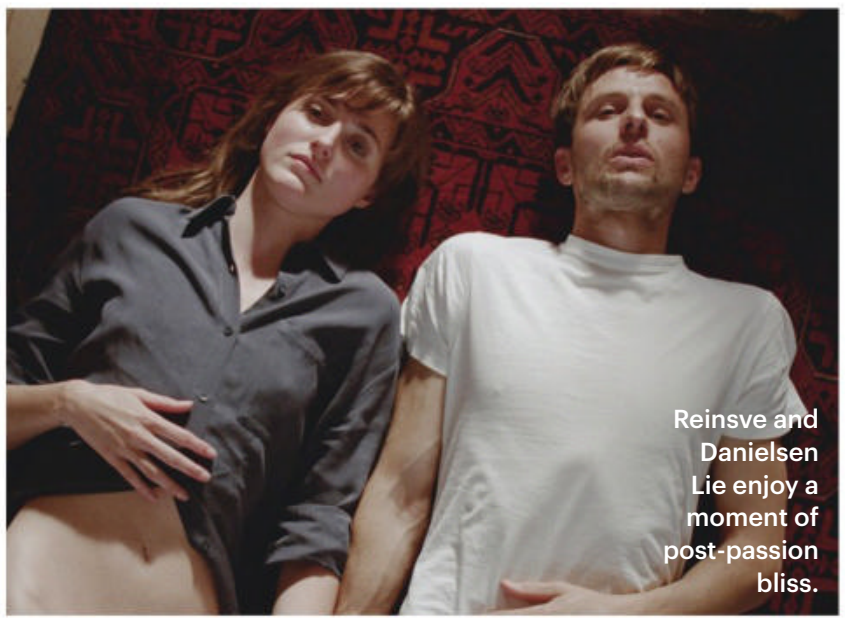
And then, adulthood happens. Love, expressed with breathless puppy-dog intensity by Aline, happens. And the movie takes off in another direction, slipping so seamlessly into run-of-the-mill icon hagiography (albeit with lavish, open-armed musical sequences) that it's hard to pinpoint when exactly it slides into the steadier comforts of uncritical appreciation of the pop queen. The long arc of the relationship, starting with Aline and Guy-Claude's aboveboard backstage flirtations, is made to feel like it was always a relationship between two adults. It takes so long for the irony of this to catch up to us that by the time one wonders what happened with the film's opening conceit, Aline is already old enough to be wary, worn down, overworked. She's very nearly a mother.

Whether this is what Lemercier intended is for the artist alone to say, just as her take on the real relationship in question is hers to grapple with or not. But something feels amiss – it's like the movie bit off more than it could chew and burped it up into a dinner cloth when we weren't looking. It really does simply come down to the actor doing an odd type of shtick, the kind of bit she's known for, particularly overseas. The dominant stretch of the movie does what biopics have steadily convinced us is their job to do. It delivers the public triumphs (the record sales, the romance) and in-jokes (such as Aline's first impression of what we all recognize to be "My Heart Will Go On") and private difficulties (conceiving a child, exhaustion), glinting through the bullet points of a celebrity's life with all the touch-and-go expediency of a stone sent skipping. Truthfully, Lemercier's vigorous (and still comical!) performances as Aline onstage are the only

ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS/SAMUEL GOLDWYN FILMS, 2

PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN

"MY PASSION has always been what goes on inside," says Julie (Renate Reinsve), heroine of director Joachim Trier's drama, in the midst of embarking on the first of many disruptions to her life. She's an almost-thirty-something millennial in the extreme who doesn't know what she wants to do and who she wants to be. That indecision practically amounts to a metaphysical spiral, a whole cluster of questions and confusions – to say nothing of the why undergirding it all. First there's med school. Then psychology. Then, deciding she's more of a visual person, photography. Eventually, she winds up working at a bookstore. Unglamorous, but at least that part is settled.



Reinsve and Danielsen Lie enjoy a moment of post-passion bliss.

The Worst Person in the World

STARRING Renate Reinsve, Anders Danielsen Lie, Herbert Nordrum

DIRECTED BY Joachim Trier

Unfortunately, this means that all that searching for a sense of self and the freedoms it affords (to be bad, to abandon, to have lots of sex) has to go somewhere. Perhaps unsurprisingly, romance becomes the target. Trier's film, which completes his "Oslo Trilogy" – after the well-regarded *Reprise* (2006) and *Oslo, August 31st* (2011) – is a thoughtful if obvious character study, in which Julie's relationships with the underground cartoonist Aksel (played by Trier regular Anders Danielsen Lie) and a loving, married himbo named Eivind (Herbert Nordrum) get twined together into the single DNA strand of Julie's quarter-life crisis.

Make that semi-crisis. Julie's doing just fine – even as Trier's script (co-written with Eskil Vogt) is overly intent on convincing us otherwise. Twelve chapters, some soap-opera-worthy plot swerves, a sequence in which Julie stops time: *The Worst Person in the World* has more gimmicks than usual for the Norwegian filmmaker. It sometimes comes off as underconceived where it really counts and overdone where it doesn't matter, like a plate that's more garnish than meal.

Worst is a more winning movie when it settles into the chemistry of its actors, and there are a few key moments of dramatic tension in which Band-Aids are ripped off barely healed wounds. It's in the grasping for meaning that the movie falters. Trier could have landed a good number of low blows at an entire, notoriously self-interested generation. Instead he's made a movie in which, surprisingly, people can change. It's only genuinely moving, sexy, or funny when it's sincerely capturing the rhythms of life rather than trying to reinvent them. K.A.C.

→ ALINE

thing that save the movie from becoming an outright bore. That, and the friction of wondering, what the hell just happened?

Only a late passage, when Aline escapes the confines of Caesars Palace and wanders out into the world of Las Vegas, resumes some spark of a genuine idea. It's when we see what a sheltered life the singer has lived – as if that otherworldly voice were in fact the consequence of her being from another world, an alien among us, liberated for an afternoon to consort among the rabble. For a moment, the movie's inciting gambit seems to rear its head again, and Aline seems reduced to a childlike lack of experience: a chasm between her and the rest of the world that metastasized over time, thanks to a young marriage, a startlingly successful career, and a life lived almost entirely in service of her art. The depiction is sympathetically infantile. It's a lesson in what stars sacrifice to be stars, particularly when they begin conquering the world as young as Aline/Celine does.

You can see the throughline from the movie's opening to this late fissure in the fabric of its otherwise rote routine. It's a line that cannot be drawn without Kamar: He, the older man, would be the connective tissue holding together the shrine of a bubbled, vacuum-sealed world in which Aline lives for the extent of the movie. That would be a provocative idea, as well as a paternalistic one. And in the worldview of this movie, there is no such thing as love tempered by provocation. There is no room for skepticism or cheap cynicism, much less darker tones. Laugh it off. Leave it behind. ®

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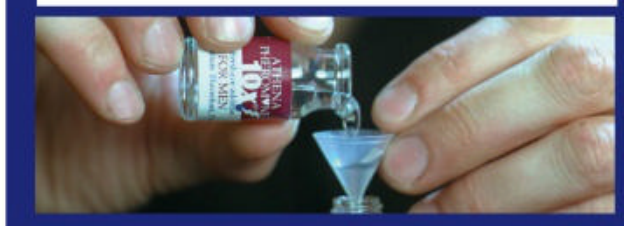

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[*Cont. from 41*] class knew who Rauw was, but he wasn't exactly the star of the group. "It was hard as shit," Rauw says, laughing.

Burgos' style of dancing is quick, energetic, and liquid, inspired by everything from hip-hop to funk to salsa. He was apprehensive about choreographing for someone from the reggaeton world at first. "Reggaeton music has the same [rhythmic] pattern every single time. And every time you hear reggaeton, you don't want to dance – you just want to do perreo the whole time," he says. But he was drawn to the fact that Rauw was willing to push himself. "He was like, 'I'm dancing,'" Burgos remembers. "The difference between him and everybody else is that he actually was very determined in what he wanted. A lot of people get sucked into that pressure of 'Oh, I might not be as cool.'"

Still, Rauw wasn't born with the preternatural dance ability of someone like Usher or Timberlake. It was another side of his career that required hours of steadfast commitment. "I had to break him down and I had to build a sense of, like, 'You need to feel comfortable doing this, and you need to feel comfortable onstage. You need to feel comfortable humping the stage,'" Burgos says. That more outrageous, unabashedly provocative choreography is part of the show now, and often what gets fans screaming. Burgos' wife and collaborative partner, Denise Yuri-Disla, spent more than 10 years dancing for artists like Don Omar and Daddy Yankee, and says they put on "supershows" that often featured as many as 10 to 12 background dancers, almost always women. She adds that the difference is Rauw is up front, interacting with his dancers – his are both male and female – and keeping up with the choreography. "What Rauw and Fefe are doing is a completely different turn. There's no way you don't notice the dancers now. There's always a story happening. They're saying something," she explains. "It's like a Broadway show."

Seeing a major reggaeton artist pull off intricate choreography isn't something an audience can get from a Maluma or J Balvin or Bad Bunny concert or music video; dancing has become a defining characteristic of who Rauw is. Burgos sees him experimenting with even more styles of movement. In Rauw's recent performance of the song "Desenfocao'," Burgos encouraged Rauw to try dancing with more flamboyant theatricality, like the Joker.

But while Rauw's style has added something undeniably new to the genre, some have been critical of its softer edges. We're sitting at the Four Seasons Hotel in Surfside when Rauw plunges into the knottier, more intrusive parts of fame. "Nowadays, the internet is toxic," he says. "People exaggerate stuff, and there's a lot of haters." He seems to take skepticism in stride, yet over the summer, a feud erupted between him and the reggaeton artist Jhay Cortez, who has dismissed Rauw as a "pop star" and mocked his dancing. Rauw alludes to the tension in our conversation, saying, "I'm at peace with the world. You know, I had a thing with this guy, this artist people know in Puerto Rico." I ask him who he's referring to, and he waves his hand dismissively. "I don't want to mention his name in my interview. But stupid stuff. I don't care. I'm always gonna be me, I'm always gonna respect my vision." A pugilistic side comes out, though: "I'm a cool guy, but I'm from Puerto Rico. If you fuck with me, *yo soy un gallaito de pelea* ["I'm like a bird in a cockfight"]. I'm not afraid."

After we talk, in the days leading up to Christmas, Rauw releases a diss track aimed at Jhay called "Hunter," outlining Rauw's banner year. Jhay responds by tweeting an image of a fake death certificate for Rauw, and then releasing the seven-minute song "Enterrauw," which includes a line calling Rauw out for supporting "that abuser Chris Brown." During the back and forth, Cortez drops a crude lyric aimed at Rosalía in a leaked remix of the song "Si Pepe." Rauw later shoots back with "JhayConflei," a song on SoundCloud that makes several crass references to Cortez's girlfriend Mia Khalifa's background as an adult-film actor, though the track soon disappears from the site.

Because of the dancing, Rauw has been compared to Brown a lot. "If you see Chris Brown dancing, that guy is crazy. You need to be that level, so I started training and training. Now I can defend myself," Rauw says. But he's also a vocal fan of Brown, who's been a recurring presence in Latin music (he's collaborated with Prince Royce, and Bad Bunny brought him onstage during 2018's La Nueva Religion Tour).

In September, Rauw jumped on "Nostálgico," a single by the Jamaican artist Rvssian featuring Brown. Despite some criticism, Rauw says people in the music industry wrote to congratulate him – a response that reflects the industry's continued ambivalence toward Brown, who has been accused of assault multiple times since his highly public attack on Rihanna in 2009. Over the years, this topic has filtered into reggaeton: Rappers like Anuel AA have drawn criticism for collaborating with Tekashi 6ix9ine, while more recently, Farruko was condemned for using an R. Kelly sample. "That's a really delicate subject," Rauw says carefully when I ask about this. "I grew up with women. Women are my inspiration. I respect women. Everything against women, I'm like, 'No.' At the same time, my mom taught me to forgive people, to be sensitive, to try to listen, and not to live with resentment. Living with hard feelings is bad, it's like a poison. I don't defend anyone. I'm not a lawyer. But I also don't judge people."

Rauw's music is decidedly apolitical. He has his personal feelings about the injustices Puerto Rico has experienced, telling me at one point, "Puerto Rico suffers a lot, man, starting with the government. *El gobierno* sucks." But he doesn't get involved in questions about statehood or politics on the island. "I don't know a lot about politics," he says. "I probably could be a little bit ignorant, but it's just not in me."

While Bad Bunny and Residente have used their music to deliver scathing critiques of the government, Rauw says he's "not that type of artist." He seems to go back and forth, though, a little uncertain. "I think God sends people to do different jobs," he says, but adds he would support movements with artists fighting for the island. "If I need to be there to represent my island and my people, I'll do it." His home, he says, is still his main inspiration, and he sees his job as making music for Puerto Ricans.

His personal life plays a role in his music, and fans are particularly interested in how he factors in his relationship with Rosalía. "There's people that love drama, and we're not like that," Rauw says. "There's a bunch of pop stars where it's like the whole telenovela, and I hate that shit. I really hate that shit. We're real stuff. We've been together for a while."

He won't say how long "a while" is. Fans have speculated they first crossed paths during the 2019 Latin Grammys, though the couple kept things under the radar in the beginning. I ask him when they met, and he starts to say "20…" but catches himself quickly. "I can't say," he says with a laugh. They finally went public with the relationship after paparazzi shot them holding hands outside of a sceney West Hollywood restaurant. "We saw all the paparazzi, and I was like 'Yo. What are we gonna do?' And she told me, 'You know what? I'm tired of this shit.' And I was like, 'Fuck it, let's do it.' It felt right, so we went down, holding hands at the restaurant. What do you want me to say? Yeah, we're together."

The relationship has had a subtle but distinct influence on Rauw's music. Last winter, he spoke to ROLLING STONE and mentioned Rosalía without sharing that they were dating, saying only that she brought her production skills to "Dile a El," the first song off *Afrodisíaco*. Now, he admits sheepishly, "Yeah, we were together." She also helped with the album's second song, "Strawberry Kiwi." "I said, 'I need top lines, I'm kind of stuck with this,' and she sat with me and did a crazy top line," Rauw remembers. He notes that he's also been there to float ideas around for her projects. "We respect each other. That's the main thing," he says. "We're not focused on doing music together. If it happens, yeah, of course. We plan to do it, but it's not going to happen now." (About Rosalía's highly anticipated new album, *Motomami*, he offers, "It's amazing, it's amazing. When I heard the whole album, *phewww*. She's a GOAT. She's innovative. She's creating new sounds.")

While accepting an award at LOS40 Music Awards in Spain last fall, he kissed her onstage and called her "his muse." Still, he's quick to dispel the notion that everything he writes is directly about her. "Not all the songs are about her specifically. She can be my muse, but she inspires me in different ways: sounds, production-wise, not literally. People get confused. Right now, if I put out a sad song, it doesn't have anything to do with my personal life," he explains. He does make one admission: A gauzy ballad called "Aquel Nap ZzZz," sprinkled with bolero swatches and snippets of Rosalía's signature vocals, was inspired by their relationship. "That one is literally for her."

The music on *Trap Cake Vol. 2* is a little different: "I'm trying some new deliveries, how I sing, rap, more weird melodies, pitch. It's really underground, it's explicit, but it has a sweet side," Rauw says. He has started to handle a lot of the production himself, tinkering with Ableton and learning more about building songs. Recently, he started an Instagram account under @akaelzorro, the name he uses when he's credited as a producer. "No one understands what's in your head, so it's easier for you to do it than explain to somebody," he says.

He sees production as a potential next step in his career. "When I retire – well, not retire, but maybe have a stop – I probably want to produce for more people," he says. The idea of retiring is distant, though. He's achieved a lot of what he planned: His music is playing in nearly every corner of the globe. He's become the performer he wanted to be. And his mom no longer has to work all the time; instead, she gets to travel with him when she can.

But even so, he feels like he has to keep the momentum in his career going. "I think my family, being hard workers… it makes me be like them. I just want to be a hard worker all the time," he says. He does think about a day when he can just take a break for as long as he wants. "A moment will come where I'll be like, 'I just want to take a year off.' On Jan. 1, I'll look at the ceiling and say, 'What the fuck am I going to do today?' I have nothing until Dec. 31." But then he starts laughing at the absurdity of it. "One day, one day."

[*Cont. from 61*] While strolling by wetlands and plants both native and invasive, we discuss *Moonstruck* ("Nicolas Cage looks like some sort of god in that movie") and TikTok ("I don't want to put too much pressure on Gen Z, but we're really counting on them"). Mitski is upbeat and animated, mocking a woodpecker with furious head movements and stopping to observe pink lace underwear on the ground. But the artist within her makes an appearance every now and then, like when the conversation turns to bats. I say the winged creatures are both ugly and cute, and she turns around and looks at me intently through her eyeglasses: "Beauty is horror, right?"

Mitski immersed herself in music growing up, listening to the Spice Girls as a kid and singing in a choir through high school. "I remember I auditioned in seventh grade for a short solo part," she recalls. "The teacher and everyone looked at me. I was like, 'Oh, this is something I can do.'" She discovered more of her talent when she wrote her first song on piano at 18. "I'm sure a lot of teenagers experience this," she says. "I didn't see a purpose in myself, and then I was able to write this song. It was just a relief."

But she still didn't have enough confidence to pursue music in college, so she became a film major instead. "I was surrounded by people who genuinely wanted to make movies, and meanwhile, I was sneaking into the music department's practice rooms every day," she says. "It was a wake-up call."

She transferred from Manhattan's Hunter College to SUNY Purchase, an hour north, for her sophomore year, enrolled in the music program, and met Patrick Hyland, who has produced all of her albums following her self-released 2012 debut, *Lush*. "Making an album is a vulnerable process for me," she says. "I have to allow myself to be weak and ugly, and I find it hard to do that in front of just anyone. But I've done it enough with Patrick that I trust him."

Hyland recently pointed out to Mitski that she makes records "in twos," exploring an idea on one album and elaborating on it with the next. "*Lush* was in college, like, 'Oh, my gosh, there are studios! There are other instrumentalists!' And then *Retired From Sad, New Career in Music* was taking orchestral instruments and refining piano music. *Bury Me at Makeout Creek* was very DIY, punk-influenced, and guitar-driven because I had left school. I didn't have any more of those resources. I just had a guitar that I was learning how to play."

By this point, Mitski was gaining a devoted audience with her bare-bones, emotionally turbulent performances at bygone New York venues like Shea Stadium and the Silent Barn. On her next album, 2016's *Puberty 2,* she perfected that sound, from the quiet and brutally honest "I Bet on Losing Dogs" to the ecstatic punk outburst "My Body's Made of Crushed Little Stars," and won even more renown. "Her music is really visceral," Dacus says. "She's connected to a part in herself that wants to scream. Maybe you don't live in a space where you can scream, or maybe you don't have the words for what has happened to you. Mitski provides a space for that."

Naturally, Mitski went in the opposite direction next, largely putting aside power chords and screams for *Be the Cowboy,* in favor of disco chic and understated songs about loneliness and pining. That pining is usually for a kiss – "I just need someone to kiss" ("Nobody"), "Somebody kiss me, I'm going crazy" ("Blue Light"), "I know I've kissed you before, but I didn't do it right" ("Pink in the Night") – which has inspired some very funny fan-made memes. "It's very Old Hollywood: 'Let's make this kiss mean so much because we can't show any more,'" she says. "I always feel like a kiss is so much more intimate than any other act. Maybe because it's one of the first acts you do with somebody, so it's the most special."

Puberty 2 won her an opening slot on Lorde's *Melodrama* tour and rocketed Mitski to an entirely different level of fame and audience; in the weeks before she came back with "Working for the Knife," she had an impressive 6.8 million monthly Spotify listeners. While she's grateful for that success – "Everything I say is with the caveat that I'm a one-in-a-million luckiest person in the literal world" – she can't hide the fact that it began to weigh heavily on her. Thinking back on her *Be the Cowboy* tour, she says, "I was just trying to get through it every day. I was disassociated through most of that."

In the past year, as she's planned her return with *Laurel Hell,* Mitski spent time setting boundaries for herself and being aware of her limitations. She's even worked with her team to ensure that her schedule has mandatory breaks so she can eat and unwind. (In December, weeks after this interview, it was reported in *Billboard* that her management company had dissolved following a sexual-harassment allegation against her manager. A representative for Mitski says that this person is "currently transitioning out of the role of being Mitski's manager"; the manager did not respond to a request for comment.)

"I think this break has been good for me," she says. "I had physically neglected my health because I was on tour so much. I didn't have health insurance. Basically during all of my twenties, I had no time or space to figure out who I am. I needed to actually figure out how to take care of my body."

WE EXIT THE PARK and catch an Uber for a late lunch at the East Nashville vegan restaurant Wild Cow. Our driver is incredibly chatty, explaining that the increased rent in Nashville recently caused him to move to nearby Hendersonville. Mitski seems genuinely interested in the conversation, asking follow-up questions like "How long have you been here?" and "Have you noticed traffic getting worse?"

Within minutes, the driver reveals he's a struggling musician, whose Southern-rock band of seven years broke up during the pandemic. He tells Mitski all about his plans to become a singer-songwriter, his new producer, and the pitfalls of the streaming industry. "What do y'all do for a living?" he asks. "I guess we're in music too," she says.

She seems comfortable with herself these days – as if, after running away from her career and then choosing to resurrect it, she's made peace with what it means to be on her level of success. "I guess fame is relative," she tells me earlier. "There's Taylor Swift fame and then there's local-DIY-scene fame. The real struggle for me in getting bigger is, how do I maintain integrity in the performance? How do I make sure the audience experience is still intimate and emotional in this 8,000-cap room? How do I not resort to flashy pyrotechnics onstage? Because I don't want my show to be about that – I want people to enter into a place with me and have an experience, and then leave having experienced something important."

As we reach the restaurant, the driver drops us off without realizing he just spoke to one of the biggest names in indie rock. "Good luck," Mitski says, shutting the door. "I'm sorry about your band!"

[*Cont. from 31*] in our communities," Mullins tells me. "And it's really disappointing to know that out-of-state interests and global developers will be able to come in and be able to generate maximum economic gain from solar developments. We've been through the rise and decline of coal, the rise and decline of gas. Now we're going to get screwed again, on solar."

To Mullins, this is one of the invisible legacies of King Coal: It built a patriarchal economy and political culture, where rich outsiders come to Appalachia, extract what they want, suck out all the profits, and leave the people of West Virginia with nothing. It has created a culture of dependency and resentment, one that is exactly the opposite of the culture of entrepreneurship that drives Silicon Valley and other centers of 21st-century innovation. Since 2016, West Virginia has attracted less venture capital than any other state. And it's a big reason why West Virginia has about as many people as Philadelphia, but only 25 percent of the GDP of Philadelphia.

"Joe Manchin is always talking about jobs, jobs, jobs," Mullins says. "I've invited him here to see what we are doing many times. But he won't come. Why is that? He's always hanging out with CEOs, but has no time for people like me."

BECKLEY, A SMALL city in the heart of West Virginia's southern coal fields, is an old company town, where for decades men (and they were almost all men) worked to haul hundreds of millions of tons of coal out of the ground. The coal miners helped build America, but it was brutal work – if a coal-gas explosion didn't kill them, black lung would. The work put dinner on the table and pride in their hearts, but not much else. In Beckley today, there is a lot of chamber-of-commerce hype about the promise of tourism – the toll booths on Interstate 64 leading into the city are plastered with images of men fly-fishing in pristine mountain creeks – but the hard truth is people are leaving West Virginia faster than any other state in the nation. For many West Virginians, the state's like a drunk relative they just can't handle being around anymore.

But hope emerges in unexpected places. At the Dish diner, five miles down the road in Daniels, I had lunch with Joe Bevil, who manages land for the Beaver Coal Co. He's in charge of a huge tract, some 50,000 acres in West Virginia. I had called Bevil because I read in the local paper that Beaver Coal had just leased land to a solar company, and I wondered if this was the beginning of a change.

Bevil is a rough-hewn guy who worked most of his life as a mining engineer for West Virginia coal companies. Now, as general manager for Beaver Coal, he has one simple job: maximizing income from all of the property the company owns. "We have a mixture of timber, gas, and coal development, real estate, and soon, we hope, solar," Bevil explains. The company recently agreed to lease 225 acres to a solar developer.

Right now, the company's income from solar doesn't compare with the income from coal. Most of the coal that is mined on the company's land is metallurgical coal, used to make steel, which was selling for $200 a ton in recent years, a very good price that Bevil was clearly happy about. The mines on Beaver Coal's land produce about 1 million tons a year, and they get a six percent cut. That means some $10 million a year in revenue from coal.

In contrast, the lease for the 225-acre solar plant will comprise only about two percent of Beaver Coal's annual revenue. "It's no comparison," Bevil says.

But then he says something else: "The coal is going to be gone some day," he tells me. "We know that. And we have to start planning for that."

Bevil is no tree-hugger. He grew up in a hardcore Democratic family outside Pittsburgh, but then drifted to the right in recent years. He voted for Trump twice. He's not convinced the climate crisis is real (at one point, he suggests to me that microwaves from cellphones might be heating up the planet). But he says that if the climate crisis is real, he thinks it's China's job to solve it, since they are the biggest polluters on the planet.

Bevil looks around him and he knows what is happening. He knows that coal will soon be a fuel of the past, and that West Virginia politicians have misled the people of the state for years about this. Bevil knows that despite blips in the market, coal is never coming back to its former glory, and he knows that dependency on coal is hurting the state. He tells me about a Fortune 500 company that had considered locating in Beckley, then pulled out because West Virginia's coal-fired power didn't fit with their corporate sustainability goals. "If building a solar farm on our land helps accelerate the transition, that is a good thing, as far as I am concerned," he tells me.

What made me feel hopeful talking to Bevil is his pragmatism. He has spent a lifetime in the mines, doing a job that helped keep America's lights on, but he has no sentimental attachment to it. He'd be happy to cover all 50,000 acres of Beaver Coal's land with solar if the economics were right. And in Bevil, you can see how a rural coalition that could reinvent the West Virginia economy might emerge – if only there were some enlightened political leadership.

"The tragedy of West Virginia is that no politician has stepped up and said, 'Listen, this is the future,'" says political adviser Shakir. "'You guys are proud, hardworking people, but this isn't going to last forever. And I've got to find something that's going to give you that same mission and purpose that you long for.' That's what Joe Manchin should be doing, instead of talking about the virtues of coal."

Both Goldman Sachs and the United Mine Workers of America – two voices from opposite ends of the economic universe – apparently agree. After Manchin told Fox he couldn't vote for the Build Back Better bill, Goldman Sachs cut next year's growth forecast; UMWA President Cecil Roberts put out a statement urging Manchin "to revisit his opposition to [Build Back Better]." Roberts specifically pointed to provisions in the bill that extend an expiring fee mandated of coal companies to compensate miners suffering from black lung disease, encourage businesses to build manufacturing facilities for miners who have lost their jobs, and penalize companies that deny workers the right to unionize.

But Manchin's record is one that has always valued corporate profits over human lives. "If you think about what we've been through this year with fires, floods, droughts, hurricanes, and then take that to a global scale, and then accelerate that and increase the human pain that will be caused if we can't get on track [with carbon-pollution reductions] – it's just so enormous," says John Podesta. "But Trump got 69 percent of the vote in West Virginia, right? So demolishing the politics for Democrats and killing [Build Back Better] legislation probably doesn't hurt Manchin back home. In my interactions with him over the years, I would like to think that he's somebody who does care about people, and that maybe that would overcome some of this resistance. Rather than being nostalgic for the past, he has a chance to provide a pathway for good jobs and a cleaner and better future. But there's a lot of skepticism about whether he'll ever see that."

Whatever Manchin's political future may be, one thing is for sure: For West Virginians, the pain is only going to get worse. As other states benefit from the jobs and economic progress that come from the inevitable transition to clean energy, West Virginia risks being left even further behind. "West Virginia politicians can only deny reality for so long," says Rep. Sean Casten of Illinois, who helped manage the energy transition in coal-heavy regions of southern Illinois. "One way or another, the coal plants will shut down and the industry will shut down and the economy will be decimated. That is exactly the wrong way to solve this problem. The right way to deal with it is to have the courage to tell West Virginians what the future really looks like and begin to prepare for it. But that is not what any of them are doing."

After talking with Bevil, I drove through the broken streets of Beckley, past the abandoned beauty shops with vines growing over them, past billboards for divorce lawyers and ammo shops, past the markers commemorating dead coal miners near the courthouse, and onto the interstate toward Charleston. On the way, I detoured on a back road to Danville, a small town in Boone County, to visit the skeleton of the Hobet 21 mine, where I had first witnessed the explosions and destruction of mountaintop-removal mining 20 years earlier. At the time, Hobet 21 was one of the largest mines in West Virginia, covering 12,000 acres. It was run by Arch Coal, one of the biggest mining companies in the U.S. Since then, Arch Coal has gone bankrupt, reemerging as Arch Resources and shedding workers and benefits along the way. The mine closed down in 2015, leaving behind a blown-up mountain, streams polluted with toxic heavy metals, and workers without any preparation for life beyond coal. It's the story of West Virginia in a nutshell.

I found the road to the mine, but it was closed with a chain-link fence. I drove around to some back roads, and was able to bushwhack up onto a ridge and get a view of the pit. Rock and coal in the ancient mountains were exposed like layers in a wedding cake. Some scrubby locust trees grew in the "reclaimed" areas, where Arch's mining engineers had piled up dirt to make it look vaguely like a hill. A small lake at the bottom of the pit glowed toxic blue. Twenty years ago, I had stood near this spot and listened to one of those engineers tell me that blowing up mountains was a good thing because it provided more flat land for commercial development. He suggested there would be a shopping mall up here one day, maybe a factory. Hundreds of people would be employed here, he told me. It was a lie then, and it is a lie now. There are 6 million acres of abandoned mine sites in the U.S. Solar panels have popped up on a few, and not far from where I stood, a lavender farm employs a handful of former coal miners. But it is just lipstick on the coal-country cadaver that Manchin pretends is still alive. Like the disemboweled mountain itself, Manchin is a scar from a time when blasting the Earth to mine coal to burn for energy that cooked the climate was a profitable thing to do. As I stood there on the ridgetop, it occurred to me that if future historians want to tell the story of how humans turned our home into a hell zone of fire, drought, and rising seas, this would be as good of a place as any to begin. ®

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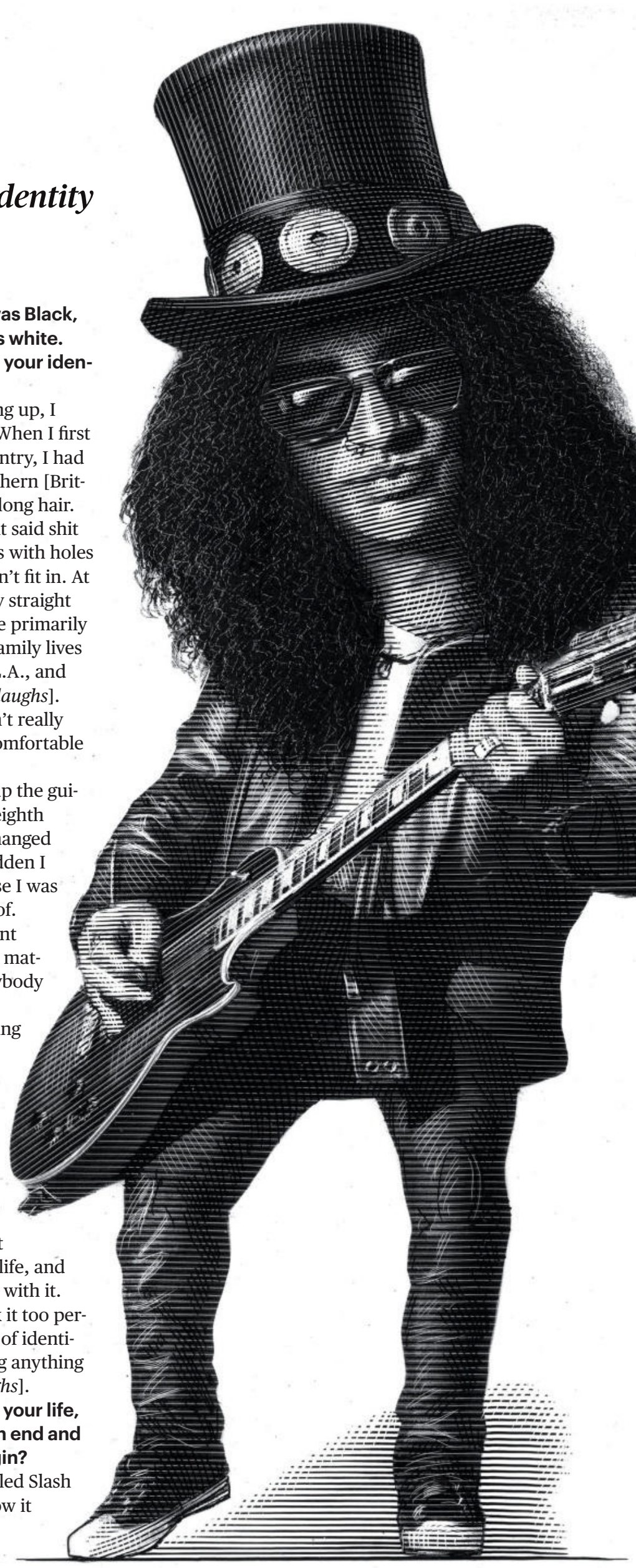
Slash

The guitar god on finding his identity and keeping the peace in GN'R



You reunited with Guns N' Roses five years ago, but you're about to release your second solo album since then. What do you get out of leading your own band at this point?
None of the other bullshit that goes with being in a rock & roll band, and having recognition and having this and that and the other, and all the stuff that people get so preoccupied with – none of that exists in this band. All anybody wants to do is get together, play, record, and go out and tour. I just keep it going because we have a good time doing it, and it's really stress-free.

Slash's '4,' featuring Myles Kennedy and the Conspirators, comes out Feb. 11.

Rock & roll isn't as popular as it once was. Have you ever been tempted to change things up?
I'm a rock & roll guy through and through. It's in my blood. I don't give a shit what the fuck's going on elsewhere; that's what I do. Now that rock & roll is not doing the numbers that it once did, I've seen the whole integrity of the genre fucking go down the tubes. After the Nineties, when file sharing started happening, everybody started wanting to be seen and not necessarily caring about what people were hearing. Now that there's no money in it, kids are fucking just doing it for the pure passion of doing it. And it's fucking great. So that's exciting to me.

Your mother was Black, and your father is white. How did you find your identity growing up?
When I was coming up, I was a real misfit. When I first moved to this country, I had a really thick Northern [British] accent. I had long hair. I wore T-shirts that said shit on them and jeans with holes in them. I just didn't fit in. At school, it was very straight white kids. But the primarily Black side of my family lives in South Central L.A., and I [felt] too white [*laughs*]. It was hard. I didn't really ever feel totally comfortable in my own skin.

Then I picked up the guitar in seventh or eighth grade, and that changed things. All of a sudden I was "cool" because I was standoffish or aloof. And from that point on, it didn't really matter what color anybody was – except for when you're looking for other people to work with in a band and your skin's darker than them. There's definitely vibes that you could pick up along the way. But it's just all part of life, and you just sort of go with it. I never really took it too personally. I just sort of identified with not being anything in particular [*laughs*].

At this point in your life, where does Slash end and Saul Hudson begin?
I started being called Slash in ninth grade. Now it feels weird if anybody calls me Saul, because the last person to really call me Saul was my late grandmother. But I keep it on my driver's license, my passport, and all my legal documents. Because it's better not to be "Slash" in that context.

What's the secret to keeping the peace in Guns N' Roses these days?
Just keeping it to ourselves. The biggest issue was that as the band got huge, as street-smart as I'd love to say the band was at the time, [music-business people] really inserted themselves in between our regular relationships and had a real negative effect on things. It ended up causing me to leave, and then being as stubborn as I am, I didn't look back.

Overall, what's been the best part about getting back with GN'R?
I think the biggest thing was getting past this horrible black cloud that was perpetuating, having to do with me and Axl. We had a lot of issues born out of third-party stuff. It was very insidious, and the longer we didn't talk, the more it got blown out of proportion. But the more significant part was, when Axl and Duff and I first got into a room playing, it was just like this fucking thing that I can't even really verbally describe. It was like, "Whoa, that's what that is." Then, just to go out and play together, it's like, I wonder how the fuck we got into that mess that we were in in the Nineties. KORY GROW

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“I see [Rauw] as someone who wants to push. Like, ‘Oh, you’re saying I can’t dance?’ OK. ‘I’m not supposed to do this?’ OK.... It’s like those things feed him to go harder.”